

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 8 - CUSTOMER SERVICE

Tuesday 31 October 2023

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio areas

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND DIGITAL GOVERNMENT, EMERGENCY SERVICES, YOUTH JUSTICE

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 9:15.

MEMBERS

The Hon. Emma Hurst (Chair)

The Hon. Mark Buttigieg
Dr Amanda Cohn (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Wes Fang

The Hon. Sam Faraway

Ms Sue Higginson

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

The Hon. Peter Primrose

The Hon. Emily Suvaal

PRESENT

The Hon. Jihad Dib, *Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Youth Justice*

CORRECTIONS TO TRANSCRIPT OF COMMITTEE PROCEEDINGS

Corrections should be marked on a photocopy of the proof and forwarded to:

**Budget Estimates secretariat
Room 812
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000**

The CHAIR: Welcome to the first hearing for the Committee inquiry into budget estimates 2023-2024. I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us here today. My name is Emma Hurst, and I am Chair of the Committee. I also welcome Minister Dib and accompanying officials to this hearing.

Today the Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolios for Customer Service and Digital Government, Emergency Services, and Youth Justice. I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures. I welcome our witnesses and thank them for making the time to give evidence today. All witnesses will be sworn prior to giving evidence. Minister Dib, I remind you that you do not need to be sworn as you have already sworn an oath to your office as a member of Parliament.

Mr GREG WELLS, Chief Executive Officer, Service NSW, NSW Department of Customer Service, sworn and examined

Ms EMMA HOGAN, Secretary, NSW Department of Customer Service, affirmed and examined

Mr SIMON DRAPER, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Reconstruction Authority, affirmed and examined

Mr MICHAEL TIDBALL, Secretary, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, sworn and examined

Ms LAURA CHRISTIE, Deputy Secretary, Digital NSW, NSW Department of Customer Service, affirmed and examined

Ms SARAH CRUICKSHANK, Deputy Secretary, Customer Delivery and Transformation, NSW Department of Customer Service, affirmed and examined

Ms JODY GRIMA, Acting Chief Operating Officer, NSW Department of Customer Service, affirmed and examined

Mr MICHAEL TZIMOULAS, Chief Financial Officer, NSW Department of Customer Service, sworn and examined

Mr JEREMY FEWTRELL, Commissioner, Fire and Rescue NSW, sworn and examined

Ms CARLENE YORK, APM, Commissioner, NSW State Emergency Service, sworn and examined

Mr ROB ROGERS, AFSM, Commissioner, NSW Rural Fire Service, sworn and examined

Mr MATT CONROW, Chief Financial and Operating Officer, NSW Reconstruction Authority, sworn and examined

Mr KIERON HENDICOTT, Acting Chief Executive – Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, NSW Reconstruction Authority, affirmed and examined

Ms CANDICE NEILSON, Acting Executive Director, Youth Justice, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

Ms SIMONE CZECH, Deputy Secretary, Child Protection and Permanency, District and Youth Justice Services, NSW Department of Communities and Justice, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.15 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. We are joined by the Minister for the morning session from 9.15 a.m. to 1.00 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 11.00 a.m. In the afternoon, we will hear from departmental witnesses from 2.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., with a 15-minute break at 3.30 p.m. During these sessions, there will be questions from the Opposition and crossbench members only, and then 15 minutes allocated to Government questions at 10.45 a.m., 12.45 p.m. and 5.15 p.m. We will begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you, Minister. I thought I would start locally, rather than one of your portfolios, and in relation to the Local Small Commitments Allocation. With your electorate, how many local projects did you commit to fund?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Are these the \$400,000 commitments that you're talking about?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can tell you that there were a number—

The Hon. WES FANG: Otherwise known as a slush fund.

Mr JIHAD DIB: There were a number that included one for women's health services, youth mental health, refugee support, some play equipment in a local park. The allocation was made—or the recommendations were made based on an expression of interest from people. They're basically there to support the community. I don't think anybody would question or doubt the importance of specially putting additional funding into women's services, particularly disadvantaged women. I don't think anybody would question the need to support refugee migrants into Australia, who are, I suppose, trying to build a better life for themselves. The women's health centre does an incredible amount of work in Bankstown, and some of that work involves things not only like building people's confidence but also giving them the skills, being able to teach them English, being able to help them integrate into society.

What we do have is a participation, a focus, in our community, and the more people we can get to participate in the breadth of our community, the better it is. There has also been some additional support, off the top of my head, for the Bankstown—I think it was the Older Women's Network. So the focus, I think, for me very much within our community was to try to support people who are vulnerable, people who would benefit from some additional funding. We know that funding is always difficult to achieve, and many of these organisations run, effectively, on the smell of an oily rag. There was also some funding that was allocated to the Bankstown Bulls Junior Rugby League Football Club.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's very interesting, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, I will just finish. That was to assist them in terms of being able to upgrade some of their facilities. Now, what they do is so much more than just about rugby league. They actually build a sense of community and a sense of belonging there. So I'm pretty comfortable in the ways that we're able to support our communities, using this additional funding.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Minister, were you able to spend the whole allocation?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think so. I can get back to you if it's within a couple of thousand or something, but I think it was the full amount. That was the \$400,000, and we spent it. We have allocated it, I should say. It was based, as I said, on expressions of interest, so people were able to put in for things. We know what the community needs, but the community understands really what they need, especially some of those names that I just rattled off, including the Bankstown Older Women's Network, refugee support and youth mental health. I can't imagine anyone on this panel would disagree with funding that goes into supporting young people with mental health challenges.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Definitely. If we look at the budget papers, what are the total expenses—if we exclude the losses for 2023-24—for the Department of Customer Service? I'm going to focus now on Customer Service and Digital Government.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure. I can give you the over-line—

The Hon. WES FANG: At least you've brought the budget papers, Minister, unlike your colleagues. It's good.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can't comment on my colleagues.

The Hon. WES FANG: Someone has learned, it looks like.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Someone actually read it.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's good.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm sure you did, didn't you?

The Hon. WES FANG: Absolutely. Chapter and verse, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, Ms MacDonald, it was for the Customer Service budget. Is that correct?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: If we're talking about Customer Service, let's not forget that it engages a number of different portfolio areas, of course. Customer service Minister includes, of course, the responsibilities—and I have also got some other things. The overall DCS budget for this year was \$2.07 billion in opex and \$214 million in capex. If I break that down specifically to the things that I'm responsible for, and I might just round them, if that's okay with you—so for Service NSW, for example, \$840 million in terms of operational expenditure, and \$36.6 million in terms of capital. The NSW Telco Authority, \$262.6 million, which is an increase of 6.7 per cent, I might add, and 2.23 per cent for capital expenditure. The Rural Fire Service, \$995.9 million in operational expenditure, and \$111.3 million in capital expenditure. The State Emergency Service, \$304.3 million in operational expenditure, which is up 54 per cent, and capital expenditure is \$52.9 million. The NSW Reconstruction Authority, which I have joint responsibility for with Minister Scully, is \$2.467 billion in operational expenditure, and capital expenditure—

The Hon. WES FANG: Sorry, can you just say that again, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It is \$2.466 billion.

The Hon. WES FANG: No worries. I thought you said 2.46 point something, so I was confused, but that's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, point seven at the end. I just rounded it up to point seven because we normally round up, don't we?

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, whatever works.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I did maths, like you did. Of course, Youth Justice fits within the whole DCJ network, but when we look specifically, as you know as the shadow Minister, there is an element of \$280 million in terms of the capex and opex.¹ Fire and Rescue—I have said this—received \$995.9 million and the RFS received \$756 million, as I said. I think that covers all of the things that I have a specific responsibility for in terms of my full responsibilities. As I said, there are other elements as well, particularly in DCS, that fall within the purview of other Ministers.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Minister, how much does this equate to in cuts compared with 2022-23?

Mr JIHAD DIB: In relation to the Rural Fire Service, it's an increase; in relation to the SES, it's an increase; and in relation to Service NSW, it's an increase of 7 per cent in terms of operational expenditure.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What programs and projects did you cut as Minister to get to this budget?

Mr JIHAD DIB: If we talk about the budget, let's put in context what we inherited. We inherited, and you've heard this before—

The Hon. WES FANG: Come on, Minister. Let's just stick to the question.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, I'm giving an answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, I know, but you are in government now. You don't need to blame us; you can just provide an answer.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Thank you, Mr Fang. What I will do is provide an answer, and I am providing the answer.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will give that context on it.

The CHAIR: There has been a point of order taken.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The Minister is entitled to provide a context when he's precluding a question. I ask that you tell the honourable member to listen to what the Minister has actually got to say before he interjects and tries to be a comedian.

The Hon. WES FANG: To the point of order: It's the same line out of every Labor Minister so far. They can just print it and put it on the door and everyone can read it when they walk in. Let's just get to the answers.

The CHAIR: I am going to uphold the point of order. The Minister can answer the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: Fair enough, Chair. Fair call.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think, as with everything, it needs to be given context. Whether you want to believe it or not, the fact of the matter is that we inherited a \$7 billion black hole and a massive budget deficit.

The Hon. WES FANG: I think that was probably challenged in the other session.

Mr JIHAD DIB: In terms of the context of the interest payments that we have alone, the interest payments that we are making on the debt of the State of New South Wales far exceeds my entire budget that I just read out. In terms of some of the programs, there have been some programs where we have said we are just going to hold off. They were funded for a certain period of time. There were some where there was no funding in there for them. There are a number that I can think of in particular. But if we think about government advertising as an example, we are reducing government advertising by \$30 million. That is also one of my responsibilities through DCS. Part of that is also then ensuring that we use all of our other forms of communication channels and digital channels that we have. We've got this great digital system in the New South Wales Government.

¹ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Hon Jihad Dib MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Youth Justice, clarified the evidence given.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you, Victor.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will say this, Mr Fang—

The Hon. WES FANG: He got it right!

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will say this, and I've said it before: I don't think you should discount the past. I've acknowledged Minister Dominello publicly and privately, in different forums, for the work he did. We have had conversations since I've become the Minister. You know me well enough to know that I generally don't play games or give disrespect to people. So when it comes to Minister Dominello, yes, there were some things that really got started. I've got to say, terrific effort by the whole team, but we are also facing a different situation at the moment. When I talked about advertising as an example, and when I talked about our digital channels, the most important part of advertising is to get messages out to the community.

I think about one of my portfolio areas now—and I want to acknowledge the RFS, which at the moment has nearly 800 volunteers and people out there fighting fires. The safety messages that we need to get out can be got out in different ways. Some of that is through the Hazards Near Me app and some of that is through our digital channels. So that's a really good one there. But, across the board, we've had to find some savings because we are in a more difficult fiscal environment. Cutting expenditure on consultancy is another one that, where possible, we should be looking internally to be able to help us. Of course, there are going to be times when we don't have that capacity in house, but I'd love to be able to see the capacity that we've got in house. So making sure we work on that.

The Hon. WES FANG: We've got it in house.

Mr JIHAD DIB: There is a savings target there.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Minister, could you provide a list to the Committee of the projects that have been cut? Could you do that on notice?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I am happy to take that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: Or if you know now, Minister.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: No, no, it's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I am happy to take that on notice. I am conscious that you will also have the public servants here later in the afternoon. They may give it to you, but I'm happy to take it on notice today.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Did you personally sign off on which projects would be cut in the Customer Service budget?

Mr JIHAD DIB: As a Minister, you've got to make some decisions, and a decision was made. There were some recommendations put to me. We did a lot of work in terms of trying to find where there could be some cost savings measures, but also a lot of work in terms of saying, "What things can we put, for example, to idle for a little bit?" So we can keep them idling, and then we can restart them a little bit later. One of the key focuses for me is saying, "Okay, we're in a different fiscal environment to where we've been before, so what we do in terms of moving forward?"

We may know there is a good project, but the fact of the matter is that we've also got to make some decisions about the here and now and about what we have and what we don't have. So for some of the programs, how can we scale back that program but not necessarily stop it? The premise of cuts and the premise that these things have been kicked out the window is not necessarily always the case. But there are some things that have had to be put on pause, effectively, for a little period of time. We hope that with some of these decisions, some of them will obviously be able to change as we improve our financial position.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So you personally signed off. Are these cuts to fund Labor's wages policy?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Ms MacDonald, the funding of the wages policy—let's talk about that. This is obviously a decision that we made—it was an election commitment that we want to fund essential workers in a fair way. We know that over the past 12 years there hasn't been a proper restitution for people who are essential workers—people who carried us through all sorts of issues, particularly when we consider during COVID and stuff like that. Some of those essential workers were the first ones there. A commitment was made that we would work with essential service workers to make sure that we provide a fairer and better restitution for the work that they do.

We've got situations at the moment where people who are essential workers actually can't live in the cities where they're working or close to their place of work simply because the 2.5 per cent wages cap that the previous

Government imposed was so far below inflation. Things have changed. If you're a teacher—and I've been a teacher before—the amount of work and the way that things have changed, people were not going into teaching because of that. People were not going into nursing. People were not going into the sectors that we require them in. That point of making sure that people are paid fairly and are paid better is one that actually creates our best society possible.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Okay. I think you've answered that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Thank you.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In the Treasurer's Budget Speech, there didn't appear to be any mention of any Customer Service or Digital Government project. Should we be concerned by that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No. The Treasurer's Budget Speech—he's got 20 minutes, and he had a lot to say. He talked about cybersecurity, for example, and Cyber Security NSW, which is part of my portfolio responsibility. Sadly—and Mr Fang might disagree with me—the fact of the matter is that there wasn't any money allocated to that going forward.

The Hon. WES FANG: It won't surprise you that I don't agree with you, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: We know the importance of cyber protection. We know, especially as we move even more things into that digital space, that cyber becomes incredibly important. So the reference was in there. I said at the very top about the budget allocation that was met. We had to make sure that we worked on priorities, and some of those priorities we know are about rebuilding our essential services, addressing the housing crisis, making the transition to renewable energy, home buyers—there is so much that we have done, so I'm not concerned about that. I've answered the question.

The Hon. WES FANG: Customer Service is easy. You just ask yourself, "What would Victor do?" That's it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: The Treasurer said, "We have been determined to make sure the public's money is being spent on the public's priorities." Are you saying that the Digital Government portfolio is not considered a priority?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've just said that there's over \$2 billion in DCS, and the digital element is one really important component of that. There are a lot of things that are in there. If I look at the Digital Restart Fund, for example, the priorities—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That's what I was going to turn to next.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Cool.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I could turn to that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: No worries. I might do a bit of a lead-in and then you can go for it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: No. I think I'm supposed to ask the questions here.

The Hon. WES FANG: How about you don't, Minister, and you answer the question? That would be a great idea.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm not going to ask the question, but I'll answer that question.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'll ask the question, then.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry. If you don't mind, I will answer that question in terms of the digital things and the Digital Restart Fund. We made a decision to re-prioritise things into priorities that will especially benefit the people of New South Wales right now. That includes, of course, access around planning and home ownership and accessibility for people—how can people engage with government and have more accessibility? How can we, across all agencies, make sure that we make all of our digital platforms accessible? What I'm really concerned about and one of the things that I'm really passionate about is making sure that there is always accessibility and that all people can access that. I'm talking about people with a language difficulty, people with disabilities, people with different difficulties that they face in a socio-economic context—that's a really important one—frontline service automation, the environment, and, of course, energy innovation, and cyber threats.

We've also got a very strong focus on making sure that we can help government agencies deliver the best services that they need to the customer of New South Wales—the people of New South Wales—and making sure that everybody does. One of the really clear things that my agency has seen, especially with the way that I've been able to push things forward, is about making sure that everybody is part of the journey, and that there's a real sense

of inclusion and that there's a real sense of belonging. If we can raise the tide for everybody, then that's much better than just raising the tide for some.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: It looks like the restart fund is only being topped up by 3 per cent. What projects are going to be cut?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There are a number of different projects. In a sec I'll be able to list some of them for you specifically, but every one of the projects that has operated through—

The Hon. WES FANG: Here come the notes. Excellent.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I don't mind receiving a note because, as you've seen, I'd rather give you the answer than try to dance around it.

The Hon. WES FANG: I reckon you'd know a little bit about your portfolio, Minister, unlike your colleague. But, anyway, that's all right.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'd rather give you the answer. I'm going to give you an example of one really terrific thing that we've done recently as a result of the DRF. I hope that all of you—I don't know if you've heard me, because you're not in the LA. Those who are in the LA would have heard—I know everyone is watching at the moment, so hello to all of our friends in the LA. I keep saying—

The Hon. WES FANG: Mookhey is on at the same time. I think you're an afterthought. But, anyway, that's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's okay. I keep saying to download the Hazards Near Me. But, on a serious note, please download the Hazards Near Me app. That was something that was developed from one of the recommendations of the inquiries. The RFS, the SES and the Department of Customer Service were able to develop a new platform, a newer app, that talks about a range of hazards—particularly at the moment we're using it—to be able to tell people what's going on. That was actually funded through the DRF. There is the money that's in the DRF, and we're looking at a range of projects from across the Government that are going to help target those priorities.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Once the funding has run out, what is your plan? Will the DRF be topped up?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Like all Ministers, we go through a budgetary process. We've obviously done a good analysis of the DRF, and I'll be putting the case forward as much as possible.

The Hon. WES FANG: Another Labor review. Is that what you're saying?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's not a Labor review. It's actually good governance when you look at what's happened and you look—

The Hon. WES FANG: I don't know. You guys are getting pretty good at reviews.

Mr JIHAD DIB: —and say, "What can we do better? What it is that worked and what it is that didn't and how we can improve things?" That's the really important one. I'm very clear in terms of my thoughts about the DRF and the importance to prioritise things, especially given what we've got.

The Hon. WES FANG: You get me next time, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can't wait. I hope you can wait.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm chomping at the bit. Bring it on.

The CHAIR: I have some questions around your role as Minister for Youth Justice. The age of criminal responsibility in New South Wales is still 10 years of age, which falls quite short of international standards. The campaign to raise the age to 14 is supported by evidence from a broad range of stakeholders, including the general public, alongside legal and medical experts. The previous Government, in 2021, agreed to move towards raising the age and in April, the current Attorney General indicated that the Government would consider the recommendations but has not issued an official position. As the Minister for Youth Justice, what will you be advocating for in relation to this campaign?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Obviously, it's an issue that affects a lot of people, and there's a lot of thought and a lot of discussion about it. What I can say—and I'm sure the AG would be better placed to answer this one—is that it's being discussed at a national level. I know that there's some work that's going on. I know that there are discussions taking place. People want to see young people have the best opportunities in life. Certainly, again,

this panel I know—my counterpart Ms MacDonald and I, we've had discussions about the importance of helping young people and supporting young people.

Everyone can make a mistake, but it shouldn't be the defining moment of their life, if we can help them there. The age of criminal responsibility is one element of it. I don't own the legislation around that, but I do a fair bit of work with, and have worked closely with, the Attorney General, and I know other people are working on it. But I'm really pleased to see that the discussion is actually taking place and people are talking about this and how we can move forward. It's not just a Government thing alone; there's a lot of consultation that's taking place. The Department of Communities and Justice has been really terrific in terms of engaging with stakeholders.

The CHAIR: Have you met with the Attorney General about this issue given, obviously, there is some crossover within your portfolio?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've met with the Attorney General. I've probably met with him a number of times about a range of issues because there's a lot of crossover. We've had this discussion and it's where he was able to tell me, "Look, it's being discussed", and told me about the discussions that are taking place and the consultations that are taking place. There's myself. There's him. And then there are other Ministers, of course, who are very impassioned about youth issues and particularly what we can do to try to assist the youth. We find the balance and that's what we've got to try to do—find the balance. There is some really terrific work.

I know it's not specific to the question, but the other terrific work that we're doing is around the issue of diversion and around the issue of doing more with communities, particularly place-based projects that work with communities. What we really want to get to—the best position that we can get to as a society is one where young people actually don't interact with the law in a negative way, don't interact with the youth justice system. How do we do that as a society? We do that in terms of wraparound, in terms of all of the services, in terms of looking at what are the causes that lead to this, how do we try to close those causes and how do we make sure that we can tailor that? There wouldn't be a person that I could think of who wouldn't want the best for young people. If their circumstances are no good, what we've got to do is change their circumstances.

The CHAIR: I'll just take you back to the question specifically around the Raise The Age campaign. Given a key role as the Minister for Youth Justice is to achieve the best outcome for young people that are engaged with the justice system itself, I'm wondering how your office is also addressing the issue of Raise The Age or whether you've been completely excluded from it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No, I'm not being excluded, not at all. Based on the answer that I've just given you, you could infer what my thoughts are in terms of—I'll have some input. And my input is, you know, "What will work? What won't work?" But in the end it's also a decision for the Attorney General to make. The one thing that I'm really pleased with is that there is a lot of consultation that's taking place. It's not a decision that's "Just do that". I'm also raising this same issue with the Attorney General when I meet with him. As I said, I meet with him on a regular basis, I think usually once a month or so. So I'll be catching up with him next month.

The CHAIR: Have you met with any of the key stakeholders working specifically in the space, such as the organisation behind the Raise The Age campaign?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Not recently, but I've met with a range of people previously. But which specific organisation? Because there are different groups that I have met with. I've met with another one. But which specific organisation are you talking about?

The CHAIR: There's the organisation behind the Raise The Age campaign itself. Of course, there are another 126 legal, social and medical community organisations that have signed on to the Raise The Age campaign.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I am meeting with them next month. As I said, I've also got a number of meetings. I met with the team at Youth Action. I was only at one of their events the other night as well and thanking people working in the youth sector. Obviously, Zoë Robinson, the Advocate for Children and Young People—discussions. I think we've had one meeting, but we're in communication. There's a catch-up coming up soon. Met with people, representatives of the—basically any organisation. One thing I'll say, Madam Chair, is my door is open and people know that I do have meetings.

The challenge with that, of course, with so many portfolios, is that sometimes meetings do take a little while to get to. But I'm certainly not a person who says no to meetings. The other thing I do too is—I've had situations where I've been at events with young people, whether they're youth events or events where—for example, if I visited a Youth Justice Centre, I will also want their input a little bit. I think it's really important to hear from young people too. I met some people who are young advocates the other night and it was really excellent

to just have a chat with them. I actually gave them some homework. I went back to my old days and I said, "Look, I really want you to put some stuff out there"—

The CHAIR: Sorry, I will interrupt you there, Minister, because I think we're going a little bit off from the questions. I appreciate your enthusiasm for the portfolio. You were talking about the fact that you've got an open door and that you're happy to meet with different organisations. One organisation, or one key body, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, I believe, has reached out to meet with you but hasn't been able to meet with you yet. Correct me if that's wrong. Are they a body that you are planning to meet with in the future very soon?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, the Public—

The CHAIR: The Public Interest Advocacy Centre. They do a lot of work with young people in the justice system.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm happy to talk to you offline with that because I've got a feeling that there was someone who I met with a while ago. But, of course, we'll try to do as much as we possibly can. But I'm not aware of any meeting request. I'm more than happy to follow it up and to fill you in on it as well. If I can just preface it with—sometimes it may not be straightaway. But I'm more than happy—and outside of this session just double-check with me. I'll follow that up for you and find out. If we haven't heard from them, we'll reach out and, if we have, we'll get to them again.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, thank you. In 2018 an inquiry into the adequacy of youth diversionary programs in New South Wales produced a report with a long list of recommendations. Are you familiar with that inquiry report?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The 2018 report—I know there have been a number of inquiries. I'm familiar with some of the contents of that report. I'm familiar with some of the recommendations that were made. But I will say as well, it was a long time trying to get across some of those things. But, in terms of youth diversion, I could talk to you plenty about it.

The CHAIR: I wanted to ask specifically about one of the recommendations from that inquiry that called for a review of the Young Offenders Act, which you have joint responsibility for with the Attorney General. Is there any work happening on a review in that space?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes.

The CHAIR: Yes? Can you tell us more about that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's currently being considered by the Government. But it has been—that recommendation has been enacted on.

The CHAIR: You can't give us any more information on that at the moment?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Hopefully at the next one.

The CHAIR: Many of the recommendations from the 2018 inquiry also called on the New South Wales Government to increase the number of holistic support services for young people in custody or on bail, with a particular focus on regional and remote areas and on young people with complex needs. As the Minister for Youth Justice, is there any work that you're doing to ensure that those support services are being prioritised?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, absolutely. If you like, I'll speak to you about a couple of things. I 100 per cent agree with you about the support services that we need to provide, particularly around people who probably don't have any other support service there. There's a sad reality that sometimes people who come into contact with the youth justice system do so because they actually don't have that support network that helps most people. In some of those cases—do you want me to keep going?

The CHAIR: You can finish your answer.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, I'll keep it short. We're doing a lot there. I visited—one example was out in Wagga that I can think of off the top of my head, where there's a terrific program there. There's effectively a wraparound service, where even part of that, which is run by one of the local Indigenous groups and Uncle James—they actually just make sure that they get the kids, for example, to school, make sure that they've got a uniform. All of those little things may seem innocuous, but those little things, when they actually accumulate, can cause some bigger problems. I can come back to that a little bit later in the next round if you like.

The CHAIR: Awesome, thank you.

Dr AMANDA COHN: In the context of the hottest year on record for the planet, what work is being done to improve early detection and response to ignitions before it gets to the point of containing large fires?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It is. The hottest year—we've just seen it. Like I said a bit earlier, right now we know that there's across the State, I think—and the commissioner may correct me if I'm wrong here. But I think there are about 85 fires that are actually burning at the moment. When you consider that it's only October and we've been fighting fires since September, we're quite worried—actually even before September. We're quite worried about that. There's work that we're doing in terms of the early detection, particularly around the issues of making sure that we can try to get to the fire as quickly as we possibly can. An investment that's been made was one of the election commitments that we made—was also about some of the early detection systems and making sure that we can do that. Did you want me to—was it specifically around fires that you wanted?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes. I'm specifically interested in early detection and response to ignitions. To help you, perhaps expand on what new technology has been trialled.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure. The Rural Fire Service works incredibly closely with the Bureau of Meteorology. We have to work so closely together. They give us as much as they can and update on where it's at. If things happen unexpected—but certainly if there, as we know, are situations where there's going to be an issue, then we could try to move our assets and people there before it actually happens so we get to it straightaway. Sometimes there are ignitions that happen in really remote areas that are very difficult to get to. We've actually got in the RFS—and these are incredible people, because I certainly wouldn't have the courage to do what they do—but they effectively get flown into an area that is pretty isolated where there's a fire. They get dropped down with just a bunch of hand tools and try to contain the fire where they possibly can. We're using any of the early detection systems that we've got.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you, Minister. I agree with you that remote area firefighters are outstanding. I'm particularly interested to understand, in terms of human resources and light aircraft capacity, are we adequately resourced to do that work?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We've got 70,000 volunteers. Now, I will say that doesn't mean that 70,000 people are available at any given time, and we would never say no to any additional volunteers. But we're confident that we've actually got the resources available in terms of some of the additional aircraft. We're the only State in Australia that actually has its own Chinook helicopter water bombing aircraft. What makes that so incredible is that it carries, I think, about 10,000 to 11,000 litres of either water or retardant. Consider that a regular helicopter might carry about, say, 1,000 to 3,000, depending on the size of it—it means it can drop a little bit. We've also got access to a number of aircraft that we can possibly get going at any given time.

There's a plan to continue working with this. We work with our friends across the different States. But I'm informed that we've got the capacity for this year, notwithstanding we'd always love more; notwithstanding, too, that many of the people who fought or are fighting fires now are similar volunteers who fought and did some work around the floods. People who are volunteers often volunteer in lots of different things. We continue to work on it. If you can just indulge me for one sec, I really do want to acknowledge the incredible efforts of the Rural Fire Service. I acknowledge Commissioner Rogers and his team for the work that they're doing. It is a really difficult time. We're doing the best that we can and we're being as well prepared as we can. One of the things I can say is that the rapid response has been really terrific in being able to focus on the protection of homes.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm specifically interested in early detection. You mentioned aircraft for water bombers and retardant; I'm specifically interested in, for example, light aircraft or other emerging technology, like drones or satellite technology. What work is being done to improve our ability to detect those early ignitions, particularly in remote areas?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We do have the drones as well, but we've also got another system. We're the first to trial, or we're using it now, and we're also helping—I can't remember which State it is, but we're helping one of the States in terms of support. We've got this system called Athena. It's based on an artificial intelligence system that absorbs all of the data that's coming in and predicts the potential path of the fire so that we can get our resources there as quickly as possible.

That's the detection, but the other preparedness that we do is to try to make sure that we reduce the hazard load wherever possible. It's a cliché that MPs love to use, but the Athena system is a game changer in the sense that it takes in all the data—whether it's the Bureau of Meteorology, whether it's people who are on the ground, whether it's the firefighters, whether it's the local community—and says, "This is what's happening right now", and starts to predict where the fire will be going. We've got that. We're also in partnership with Forestry Corporation AI and smoke detection camera systems. We've got cameras, we've got the drones and we've got the Athena. We're trying to do everything that we possibly can.

Of course, given the fires that happened in Bega recently, some of our light aircraft will fly ahead to just see where the spotting is. When the wind blows, it moves the embers forward and that's the spotting. We want to

pick up on those spots as quickly as possible so that we can quickly target that area. If we can drop some water on it before it takes hold, that's what we're trying to do. The first focus, of course, is not to have fires, but then to quickly get to them and put them out and make sure that we do as much as we can to protect people and property.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Is there any data available about what proportion of fires this season have come from escaped burn-offs?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I don't have that data. I'm more than happy to take that on notice.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I understand there is community concern about escaped burn-offs. I'm interested to understand what's being done to reduce this and if that's included consideration of bringing forward the bushfire danger period.

Mr JIHAD DIB: We can take that on notice. We did bring forward the bushfire danger period for some of the areas that we were concerned about. I think we brought it forward by, if I could just check, about a month or so? Would you like the commissioner to fill you in a little bit more?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes, please.

ROB ROGERS: Good timing.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you for your attendance, Commissioner. I understand there's a lot of operational activity; I'm glad to have you here to answer our questions.

ROB ROGERS: There is. The Minister was quite correct in what he said about the technology we're bringing to play, but I will outline some of the other detection things that we're doing. There's an XPRIZE currently out on the market with Minderoo. That is a partnership between RFS for Australia and Cal Fire for California. We're basically putting out a challenge for satellite detection of fires and reporting within 10 minutes of ignition. That would be absolutely game changing.

If you build that into things like, as the Minister said, the Athena system, you'll get instantly what fires are detected, where they're going and what their potential is in a very short space of time rather than waiting for someone to have to ring 000. We're very much hoping that that's going to give us a bit of a game changer for technology and early detection. If we can detect fires early, particularly as fire seasons are getting more and more difficult, those are some of the strategies that we need to deploy: get them early and then have a joint response with trucks from Fire and Rescue and RFS to try and suppress those fires as quickly as we can.

With regards to landowner-escaped burns, it is absolutely a problem. It's a challenge for us. Indeed, just this week we've been dealing with quite a number of fires in the north of the State. In areas around Tenterfield there are more than 10 fires burning. Firefighters develop strategies to contain those fires and then suddenly there's another fire lit, we believe, by landowners to try to protect their own properties. We're working closely with police Strike Force Tronto to try to identify those landowners and, where we can, obviously get prosecutions through police. We've also been fining—RFS can fine landowners where their burns are either illegal or they escape. We are really ramping up our action against landowners because it is costing the State hundreds of thousands of dollars each year.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you for the detail around the enforcement. I'm interested also in what work is being done to prevent those burn-offs being lit.

ROB ROGERS: I guess the point is that local areas have the ability, as the Minister said, to say, "Given the local conditions, we should bring forward the fire danger period." In the north of the State they typically do that each year because the fire season happens earlier up there. We empower local communities—I mean, it ultimately gets approved by us, but we never knock back when they want to bring them forward. The challenge we have is that if we bring it forward, say, to all year round that would be a considerable resource issue for us, particularly because a lot of the people who are issuing those permits are volunteers. We would have to then look at how we resource that. That would be a challenge for us if we were to have year-round permits.

Dr AMANDA COHN: In my last 30 seconds of time, I'm interested in that cited volunteer number of 70,000. How many of those 70,000 are trained, up to date, active and ready to actually respond this summer?

ROB ROGERS: Normally we have—I will make sure I give an accurate answer, but it's around 45,000 that are trained and ready to go. They're doing the operational firefighting side of it; the other people are doing support services. At the end of the day there are a lot of people who may not turn out every day, but when there's a big campaign fire they will come out and help and do night shifts and things like that. We run on about 45,000, we believe is the active number.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, how are you?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm going well. How are you going, Mr Fang?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm fabulous.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That is excellent. Absolutely fabulous or just fabulous?

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, let's see how you feel after this 20 minutes, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'll be feeling fabulous.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm just asking for some papers to be tabled. While that's happening, Minister—you'll be provided a copy, the RFS commissioner will be provided a copy—you obviously would be aware that we're in a bit of a fire danger period, high risk. Are you confident that your team is well prepared for any fire that's coming up?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Is it in relation to this document you've tabled?

The Hon. WES FANG: Just in general.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Let's start. So you're talking about—

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you confident that your team is well prepared and ready for whatever might occur at the moment?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, I am. I know that they're doing their very best. They've been preparing for the season ahead—

The Hon. WES FANG: And you're confident that the fire teams are ready to go and that they will be able to deal with the issues that come up?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've got confidence in them and I've got confidence in the work that they've been doing, and I've got confidence in the organisation made up of a lot of volunteers who are giving up their time to protect the community.

The Hon. WES FANG: Agreed. Minister, in that respect then, I will ask you to have a look at the paper that I've just tabled. This is a message that was sent out to RFS members in a certain brigade. It basically says, and I will read it:

Morning All

We have nearly maxed out our limit on our Motorpass account.

THIS MEANS WE HAVE TO LIMIT THE USE OF THE MOTORPASS CARDS AT THIS TIME.

This effects—

it names the brigade vehicles—

only.

It may take a few days to fix the issu

For trucks deploying to—

and it sort of gives away the area—

we will arrange to get Ampol cards we have from council to one of you.

This will allow all the trucks deployed to fill up.

Minister, how have you allowed your RFS trucks to not be able to even fill up on their cards? What would happen in an emergency?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think, Mr Fang, what you are talking about here is a particular issue. This is the first time that I've seen it. I'm more than happy to look into it and come back to you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is this the first time you're being made aware of this issue?

Mr JIHAD DIB: You've just tabled this in the Committee, and—

The Hon. WES FANG: Have your bureaucrats not told you about this?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think, Mr Fang, as you know—

The Hon. WES FANG: I think it is pretty—

Mr JIHAD DIB: As you know, currently we have had some fires—

The Hon. WES FANG: I know, I know, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Let me finish, please. At the moment, we've got 85 fires. We've got seven total fire bans right now. There are a number of things that are happening. The agency and the firefighters have been doing everything they can.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I appreciate that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It is obviously an issue that we'll look into.

The Hon. WES FANG: And given the number of fires that you have raised, there are any number of issues around the State, would you not make sure that your RFS trucks are able to get fuel when they need it so they can fight fires? This message was sent on 26 October 2023. If you're only finding out about this now, does that mean that someone in your office or your department is trying to cover things up and not make you aware of genuine issues where RFS trucks can't get fuel?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There's no cover-up that's going on. I find that a little bit offensive that you would say that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is this in relation to budget cuts? Is this because of your budget cuts?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, as I said earlier, we've actually increased the budget to the RFS. This is obviously one—

The Hon. WES FANG: Then how come your trucks can't get fuel, Minister? How come your trucks cannot get fuel?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, this is one issue. I've said to you I will look into it and I'll get back to you. I'm going to be here—

The Hon. WES FANG: We've got to share an Ampol card if we want to deploy somewhere. It's pretty bad. How do you feel about it, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mate, I am happy to find out a bit more about that. I'm not sure if the commissioner has any more to say.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's a bit of a shock, given that it is a week ago. You should already be aware of this, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, Mr Fang, there's a lot of things that I am aware of. Obviously, this is an issue that we will look into. I'm not sure if the commissioner has anything—

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, I would like to hear from the commissioner, if you wouldn't mind, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, maybe we can probably tone it down a little bit, mate, it's okay.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just think it's quite serious—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think it is.

The Hon. WES FANG: —and I think that asking to tone down the issue—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order—

The CHAIR: There's been a point of order. Order!

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The Minister has made it clear that he's unaware of a micro operational issue.

The Hon. WES FANG: Here we go. Labor's calling it a micro issue.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I'm trying to make a point of order, Madam Chair.

The Hon. WES FANG: Let's ask the RFS people what they think about that.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can you put him back in his box? He has called on the commissioner to see if the commissioner can elaborate. I ask you that they just be given the time to do that.

The CHAIR: Yes. The Hon. Wes Fang has agreed to hear the answer from the commissioner. The Hon. Wes Fang now has the floor, but if he wants to hear the answer from the commissioner, then I suggest he do so.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll hear from the commissioner.

ROB ROGERS: Thank you. I haven't seen this either. I've never seen this before. So I'm happy to look into it. I will speculate to you though that this is a council card. Because councils have—the trucks are vested in council, so the councils normally will have those fuel accounts and issue the cards. I am happy to check it out, but that's why I wouldn't probably know about it, because it's a local government issue because the assets are vested in them.

The Hon. WES FANG: What if you call on the assets to be deployed?

ROB ROGERS: We would absolutely—we'd put them on a credit card if we needed to. All of our staff have credit cards and if there was a problem with those cards, we would authorise our staff to use credit cards.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is this a pretty widespread problem? Is this something that happens—

ROB ROGERS: I don't believe so. I can remember one other case where there's been a card problem with—and it's been, again, it's a local government account, not a State Government account.

The Hon. WES FANG: In that respect, do you support the vesting assets, for the State Government to have the assets, as opposed to the councils?

ROB ROGERS: With respect, it's not my job to give government—

The Hon. WES FANG: But you would be aware of—

ROB ROGERS: It's a Government policy issue.

The Hon. WES FANG: But you would be aware, obviously, now that—

ROB ROGERS: I'm aware of the issues.

The Hon. WES FANG: If this is a council issue that has arisen, it would make sense that this needs to be then resolved by vesting the interest with the State Government, so that this doesn't occur again. Would that be fair?

ROB ROGERS: I guess that's one way you could look at it.

The Hon. WES FANG: It would be the right way to look at it, I would think.

ROB ROGERS: The other way you could look at it is to talk to the council and find out what the problem is with the account. You know, it is not a widespread issue, I don't believe.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, I found out about it. So, I mean, let's have a look.

ROB ROGERS: You seem quite a good investigator on these matters, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm fabulous, let me tell you. But we will get to some of the other stuff that I'm going to do later. I might move on, if that's all right, because I've only got limited time.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, if I could just ask, when did you find out about it?

The Hon. WES FANG: I found out about it very recently.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Would you have not just said, "Hey, here's an issue. Can you try and solve it straightaway?" Or did you save it to play politics?

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I didn't save it to play politics. But it is one of the issues—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Because that's a question that I have.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's one of the many issues. Well, I don't think it's a small issue, Minister, and that's the thing.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I didn't say it was.

The Hon. WES FANG: I think it's the way we've defined it, noting the Hon. Mark Buttigieg finds it a micro issue when RFS trucks can't get fuel. I think that's pretty poor. But, anyway, that just goes to show the support that the Labor Party gives to the Rural Fire Service.

Mr JIHAD DIB: My only appeal would be if there are things that we can do to help resolve a situation, I would rather find out sooner than later.

The Hon. WES FANG: Let's shift gears, Minister, shall we?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: And we'll discuss the operational budget for Fire and Rescue. Can you confirm the wages have seen an increase of 4.5 per cent?

Mr JIHAD DIB: You've seen that was our policy as a government, 4½ per cent, yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: When does it take effect?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We signed—actually, we came to an agreement, I think would have been about a week-and-a-half or two weeks ago. So I'm assuming then it just runs through the process of how it works with payroll and so forth. I've got to say the award was approved by the IRC and it was actually a really great way of being able to see Fire and Rescue NSW working—

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got plenty of questions, Minister, so I'm just going to redirect you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's okay, I'm just answering.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, no, I appreciate that. Very short answers because I've got a lot of questions for you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: No worries. I've got plenty of time.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given that that was only handed down a couple of weeks ago, Minister, was that factored into the budget? That was handed down about five, six weeks ago?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That would be a budget question.

The Hon. WES FANG: I know. You're the Minister, so that's why I'm asking you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes. And, Mr Fang, as you know, within the budget there was an account for the 4½ per cent increase across the public sector.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay, so it is in the papers is what you're saying?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's been accounted for in the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's been accounted for in the budget?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Been accounted for in the budget, yes. And as a government we didn't hide from that. As a government we actually proudly said that people who are front line, emergency and essential service workers deserve more pay. Because we actually believe in the value of supporting people who support the community in a way so that they can actually do it.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate you've got a—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: We debated this in the upper House, Wes. Were you asleep?

The Hon. WES FANG: I would ask the Hon. Mark Buttigieg, given that both of the contributions he has made so far are not really helpful—

The CHAIR: Is this a point of order?

The Hon. WES FANG: He might just sit there quietly and he can use his time later.

The CHAIR: Is this a point of order?

The Hon. WES FANG: No, it's just an observation. Thank you.

The CHAIR: It's your time then.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you've said that it was accounted for in the budget, and yet you waited until only a couple of weeks ago to announce it. Were you playing politics with this announcement?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's a really good try, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, it's a genuine question. I'm glad you find it funny, Mr Dib.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Let me tell you—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm glad you find it funny, but I'm not laughing here because budgets are serious.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, budgets are very serious. But let's just go back a step. We actually had to negotiate an award and an award is not just the pay. It's also about the conditions. We were in the award

negotiations. I want to make sure that we get the best award that we possibly can. So that was an offer made that was in terms of the pay and an award agreement that was signed off, and I think it's the first time in a long time that there's actually been a really good award negotiation process that helps everybody in terms of making sure that we can do the very best that we could. It's something in terms of the negotiations that the previous Government didn't do. They didn't give essential workers the respect that they deserve.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, Minister—

Mr JIHAD DIB: They didn't treat essential workers with the remuneration that they expected.

The Hon. WES FANG: I think I've given you that free pass on that rhetoric before. You table all your rhetoric up-front and then we can just get it out of the way so you're not wasting my time with it.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, look, I'm being respectful here.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm going to ask the next question.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: Was there back pay included in the agreement?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, it was backdated to the expiry of the award.

The Hon. WES FANG: Which is?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The expiry of the award, off the top of my head, is about February or so. And that's, again, in that sense of fairness.

The Hon. WES FANG: So we had the budget handed down a number of weeks ago. You've held announcing the wage increase until a couple of weeks ago—before the estimates. You then have back pay in there. You've said in the forwards that the 4.5 per is there. Is the back pay included in that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It is. I have to maybe point something out. I said it expired in February. In February there was a different government, as you might remember. That previous government, which you were a part of, knew that that award was coming up for conclusion and actually let it expire. So we have done the right thing. We have worked with the agency. We worked with the representative body.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you saying we weren't doing the right thing, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, it expired under your watch, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: Given the union campaign, there might've been a bit of games being played there.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think paying people for the work that they do and having an award agreement is actually a really good thing.

The Hon. WES FANG: I agree.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's the right thing to do. It's the fair thing to do.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm going to move on, if that's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, please do.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Are you sure you agree, Wes?

The Hon. WES FANG: I'd ask you to just don't waste my time—thank you, Mr Buttigieg.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, I missed that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Buttigieg just likes to waste my time because he has nothing else to—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Contribute.

The Hon. WES FANG: —contribute. Yes. Minister, is overtime guaranteed in the new award?

Mr JIHAD DIB: In what way? You mean is there a set type of overtime or would there be overtime? What do you mean?

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you guaranteeing that members will be able to access overtime? Are overtime payments guaranteed in the award?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's budgeted for, but it's not built into the award. To give you an example of how it works, Mr Fang, if somebody is away and we need to ensure that we have that covered to make sure that we can

be able to get our appliance—in other words the minimum crew numbers—then we do the overtime. That's budgeted for. I'm also happy to say that we made the commitments to have additional firefighters so that we can make sure we have additional firefighters. Under the previous Government, the population increased by a million people and yet firefighter numbers in the station actually decreased. We're rectifying that. Yes, overtime is budgeted for, but that's not the thing that you actually put in an award.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm going to ask you to turn to the *Agency Financials Statements 2023-24*.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Just a sec. What page are you on, Mr Fang?

The Hon. WES FANG: C1121, and page 3-8. Just while you're looking at that, Minister, there are guarantees of overtime in the new award.

Mr JIHAD DIB: In the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, in the award.

Mr JIHAD DIB: In the budget, I said that. In the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: In the award, do you guarantee overtime?

Mr JIHAD DIB: In the budget, there's an overtime provision.

The Hon. WES FANG: Not in the budget. I am asking you about in the award, do you guarantee the RFS members—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Whereabouts on this budget paper is it—sorry?

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I'm asking you to turn to that while I'm asking you a question about the previous line of questioning that I was asking before.

Mr JIHAD DIB: And I answered the question. I said that it's budgeted for.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. I've asked if it's guaranteed in the award that you've signed. But that's all right.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's budgeted for, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. I will take that as a yes. That's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've actually said it's budgeted for. That's pretty clear.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. Clear as mud, Minister. According to the budget papers—and you have those open there, thank you. I'm glad you actually brought them, unlike Minister Kamper. The budgeted employee-related expenses for 2023-24 are—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I have 766,166. Is that the one you're talking about?

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, that would be fairly close.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Do you need to borrow my budget papers? Did you bring one yourself?

The Hon. WES FANG: No, Minister. I have mine. I'm a different generation; mine are online.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's ageist.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, well, it probably is. Can you tell me what the actual employer-related expenses for 2022-23 were?

Mr JIHAD DIB: They were 774.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. So do you agree that the budgeted employee-related expenses for 2023-24 are about \$8 million less than the actual employee-related expenses for 2022-23?

Mr JIHAD DIB: What I can tell you is that the budget allocation for 2022-23 was \$664 million, and it's been increased to \$766 million in 2023-24.

The Hon. WES FANG: But, Minister, my point is that the actual expenses is less than what you have got budgeted for for the next financial year. Does that seem reasonable to you, given that we are moving into a hotter, drier and more risky fire season?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm going to say once again that the budget has actually increased by roughly \$100 million. It's actually increased.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you're deliberately ignoring the question that I'm asking.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm giving you an answer about the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: The actual financial costs of the 2022-23 budget were 774.1. You budgeted 766.6. Now, Minister, you have budgeted \$8 million less than what you actually spent the year before—moving into a hotter, drier season. How is it that you have allowed a situation to occur that you have budgeted for less than you have spent the year before?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, the budget has been increased by about \$100 million on what was budgeted for the previous financial year. There are also a number of things that come into play as to why the actuals were higher last year. Part of that would be some of the natural disasters that people were dealing with—

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you saying you're not expecting them now? Are you saying you're not expecting any natural disasters now?

Mr JIHAD DIB: What I will say, Mr Fang, is there are a number of measures that we're putting in place. The first one being—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, it looks like a budget cut to me.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It actually looks to me like a \$100 million increase in the budget.

The Hon. WES FANG: It looks like a whacking great big budget cut to me, given that you also have a 4.5 per cent increase in wages.

Mr JIHAD DIB: And you still don't like to pay people for the work that they do.

The Hon. WES FANG: Don't obfuscate, Minister. This is what work you did with your department and the Treasurer for this financial year and this budget. At the moment it looks very much like you've got a whopping great big budget cut in what is moving into a very risky fire season, and the fact that your fire trucks can't get fuel I think is the start of the problem.

Mr JIHAD DIB: You might've got your grab there, but in the first instance, Mr Fang, what I will say is that there's been an increase. As I have said, there's been quite a large increase.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you fight for the men and women of New South Wales who volunteered for the RFS?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'll answer your first question, and then the second one. The example you just gave is around a different issue. That was the RFS. There is Fire and Rescue NSW and the RFS—because you did ask that question a little bit earlier. The fact of the matter is the Minns Government has actually increased the funding to Fire and Rescue NSW quite substantially. They had been underfunded by the previous Government. We have increased that funding.

The Hon. WES FANG: I wouldn't say it's underfunded at all, Minister, because we had one figure that was budgeted and yet we had a huge overspend because we funded the things that needed to be funded.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Hang on a second. The logic of that—so you actually underfunded but you're then happy to say that you overfunded.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, we had a budget, but we supported our people by making sure that the money was there when they needed it. What you've done is taken that knowledge and underfunded it by \$8 million and then put a 4.5 per cent wage increase on there. You've underfunded Fire and Rescue, haven't you, Minister? Did you fight for them? Did you fight for your people? You're the Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, let me tell you about—

The Hon. WES FANG: At least you can get my name right. I'm pleased about that bit.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Let me tell you about the amount of respect that I have for the people that I'm privileged to be the Minister for.

The Hon. WES FANG: Then why don't you fund them?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, we have increased the budget quite substantially. You're playing a really interesting game here. We've increased the budget quite substantially. We've given them the biggest—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm not playing any game, Minister. This is budget estimates. I'm holding you to account for the decisions you've made, and you have made a budget cut to Fire and Rescue at a time when New South Wales can little afford it.

Mr JIHAD DIB: We have given the biggest increase in the wages of firefighters and fire rescue personnel in over 10 years.

The Hon. WES FANG: And they can't get fuel for their trucks.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That is something that the previous Government didn't do, and we have increased their budget. You yourself just said that you underfunded them.

The Hon. WES FANG: I never said that. Don't verbal me, Minister, because it won't end well for you.

The CHAIR: Order! We're moving onto crossbench time now.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Good morning, Minister. I just wanted to ask you, firstly, about the recent move to abolish the—and this is clearly a cross-portfolio issue for you, but it's incredibly important in Youth Justice. You saw the suspect target management plans by police on young people. That has recently been abolished. The findings from the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission were incredibly alarming. Perhaps not too many of us are working in that field and paying large attention to that field, but the LECC said that it constitutes "agency maladministration", "serious misconduct", and that the use of that program on young people was "unreasonable, unjust, oppressive or improperly discriminatory in its effect on children and young people" and has resulted in police acting unlawfully. In particular, it has had an incredibly oppressive impact on First Nations young people. Can I ask you, Minister, firstly, are you aware of the program? Are you aware that it has been abolished? Are you going to be advocating for some form of redress program for young people in New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I am trying to remember most parts of the question. Obviously, I have seen some media reports about that, and I will have a closer look into it. Obviously, there's a matter there for the police. My advocacy for young people is well known; my belief in what we can do for young people is really well known. But I think it's making sure that I—where I'm responsible for in terms of my Youth Justice portfolio, it's in working with the young person after they've come in contact and they're coming to, basically, the youth justice system and what we can do at that point. I'm happy to follow that up, but, of course, I will always advocate for the best things possible for young people.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you for that, and I appreciate your genuine youth advocacy. In looking at that, will you commit to looking at—because we are talking about young people that have been forced into the criminal justice system, who have suffered dramatically at the hands of the youth criminal justice system. Given this finding—and it is a radical finding—are you looking at a potential redress to those young people who have been significantly harmed by the State system over the last few years?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Ms Higginson, if I could just have a bit of a chance to have a look at that report and to understand it a little bit more and to also work with my colleagues across the different portfolios. I want to—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: This is the Law Enforcement Conduct Commission. I don't think I have seen words like this for some time in looking at a particular program: "constitutes agency maladministration", "serious misconduct", "unreasonable, unjust, oppressive and improperly discriminatory". That's our Law Enforcement Conduct Commission on our young peoples and particularly First Nations young people. Will you open your mind to the fact that there may be a serious case for a redress system for those young people that have been suffering at the hands of that program?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Ms Higginson, obviously an open mind—the words that you've just read are quite difficult words to hear, and it goes very closely to the heart of what we want to try to achieve for young people. I already work well with the police, especially in the youth space, and will continue to do that. But the report—kind of like, there's the media in it today. I will be straight up with you: I haven't been able to have a good look at it, but obviously I will. I commit to you that I will work with whoever I need to, including the police, to try and make sure that we can have a look at this situation.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Given your close relationship to police, could you also please look at whatever replacement program—if the police are intending a replacement program—is focused on good youth justice outcomes? Can you please commit to involving Aboriginal-controlled organisations in any development if in fact there will be the development of a new program?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Absolutely. I will certainly be a part—to consult, to offer my bit into that. I will say that one of the things that is really important to me—I think you might not have been in the room earlier; I was talking about diversion, and I think we just ran out of time. That issue around diversion and the issue around place-based solutions and community-led solutions is really important to me, and we're doing—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you, Minister. But remembering this is actually even before those diversion—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know, but—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: This is just getting police out of young people's lives, when they shouldn't be in there.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure. In that context, of course, it looks at the bigger picture. The other part that I had said is, "What are the gaps and what are the problems that actually lead them to the point where they come, basically, to a diversion program?" We want to try and stop it way before it gets to that. That actually also involves agencies that may include Health and it may include Education. What's the early intervention? If I could just add in there, absolutely the community voice and, in that sense, Indigenous and First Nations voice. There is an overrepresentation of young Indigenous people.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just point to you as well that the groups that were literally advocating for the abolition of this program over years are PIAC, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, which you have referred to and drawn at before, the Redfern Legal Centre and a bunch of incredible frontline justice advocates. Can I please urge you to meet with them as a matter of priority?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will, and I committed to that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Redfern Legal Centre, I have met with them a number of times, previously and now.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Wonderful.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Incredible amount of work that they do in advocacy.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'm running out of time, Minister. Can I keep going?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, I've got to get a track of this time thing.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know. I've got some more questions.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Dr Cohn has been very patient.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Could you please tell me how many people under the age of 18 are currently incarcerated in New South Wales right now?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Right now? I might ask—if I could just hand over to the secretary, if that's okay.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: From memory, 231.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We can clarify after the break, too. How many of those are First Nations people, children and young people?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Would you prefer that we take that on notice and come back to you in the afternoon or—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Or if Mr Tidball wants—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I have all the figures here, and I am anticipating going through them—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I can come back this afternoon.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, if that's okay.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, earlier I noticed you said that we could imply your views in relation to Raise The Age in questions to the Chair. Was I correct in implying that you are an advocate for raising the age of criminal responsibility? If so, what do you suggest the age of criminal responsibility should be in this State—12, 14, 16?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That position I haven't yet come to. To me, it's a really important thing about where we can find a potential thing that does work, what the discussions are that I have been having with a range of different stakeholders, including the matter around the AG, around the police. I am one of many people who will be obviously making some input, but I really want to focus on making sure that we can do the best for young people, trying to avoid contact with the legal system. That's also complex—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Minister, I note that you did refer to the now redundant goal of national harmonisation around Raise The Age and the meetings of attorneys-general. That has been abandoned; States are going alone. Right now young people in New South Wales need a champion to raise the age of criminal

responsibility. I've been talking to the Attorney General. Young people right now need a champion to raise the age, Minister. Please be that champion for our young people. The case to raise the age is so made.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, it has been.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: The Chair made that case today on behalf of those hundreds and hundreds of people.

The Hon. WES FANG: Where's the question?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Will he be the champion?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've always been a very strong advocate for young people, Ms Higginson. I've been meeting with a range of people from—I was privileged, actually, to be shadow Minister for youth justice many years ago where I spoke to a number of people about the issue of Raise The Age. I think—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Last question from me. Last year we asked about music in Youth Justice Centres and access to computers and tablets in prisons. Has this been rolled out?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In Youth Justice Centres, access to computers and tablets and music. It has been rolled out in adult prisons. The department said at the time that they were very supportive, but it was a bit cost-prohibitive. Where are we? Have we done it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can speak to some of the things, and I might ask the secretary specifically. We are doing whatever we can across the different Youth Justice Centres. Myself and Ms MacDonald I know have visited different ones with different therapy and different education—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Have we rolled out the tablets and the music? Have we done that yet?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: No, we haven't.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It is in the process.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I have got those figures on me now.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Did you want a corrected figure? Would that be okay?

The CHAIR: You can give those figures now, if you like.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I said 231. It was not; it is 212—

The Hon. WES FANG: Budget cut.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: —total in-custody population, of whom 61 per cent or 129 of those in custody were Aboriginal young people. Of that 212, 161 of those are on remand.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Minister, the Far West Joint Organisation of Councils, including the shires of Central Darling, Wentworth, Balranald and Broken Hill, have written to yourself and Minister Jackson requesting an independent review into flood management in the region, noting the unique and significant issues surrounding the management of the Lower Darling and its connection to Menindee and the lake system. Will you commit to an independent review that incorporates input directly from community as well as from response agencies?

Mr JIHAD DIB: In any review and anything that we do, we will make sure we incorporate community consultation and speak with the community about it. I believe, in a sense, that community has to have a voice. They also have a long history in the place, so they know things that maybe other people don't know.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Will there be a review into flood management in this region, in the Far West?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There is some flood management work that has been undertaken. The Reconstruction Authority is here. If we do something, it will always involve the community. I know some of the areas you are talking about. Probably the water Minister might be better placed to answer some of those questions.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I will ask her the same question tomorrow.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can actually give you, if you would like, an answer.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Please.

Mr JIHAD DIB: So in March this year the Menindee community experienced a mass fish kill upstream of Lake Menindee. Is that the one you are talking about?

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm not just talking about the fish kills; I'm also talking about the flooding.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I might ask the Secretary of the Premier's Department, if that's okay.

SIMON DRAPER: Ms Cohn, I haven't seen that particular letter, but there's going to be a program in New South Wales of doing disaster adaptation plans for all catchments and regions. They will roll out over a number of years, depending on the level of risk in each area. That's the methodology we now have under our legislation for doing those flood risk studies and other hazard studies. That will be the process we will put in place. I don't know that that catchment and that region is in the first wave of those disaster adaptation plans, but that's the best methodology we have available to do that.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Minister, I would urge you to consider that councils in this area have written to you specifically asking for an independent review in this region to be prioritised.

Mr JIHAD DIB: As the secretary said, we will be working to it and obviously base our priorities in terms of even, as you are aware, some recent legislative changes to make sure that we've got local voices in LEMCs, so that they're also across it. I think that's a really good point because different communities will require different levels of expertise and input based on, again, location and the local emergency management committee. That affords us the opportunity to make sure we have a community voice. These reviews and the work that we're doing on flood and flood mapping and adaptation plans is really important. We'll work through that and make sure that we do put them in areas that we can prioritise, as much as possible, given that there are so many to do.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm coming back to fires while we have Mr Rogers' valuable time here. The most recent Bushfire Inquiry progress report recommendation 47 (d) appears to have been completed. This referred to community engagement with affected residents to discuss back-burns where there's significant concern within a community. I'm interested to understand how this has been implemented and where it's enforced in operational protocols.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Is that a question to me or to the commissioner?

Dr AMANDA COHN: If you can answer it, I'd be delighted, but I expected that it would go to the commissioner.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think it would be fair enough to hand over to the commissioner on that one.

ROB ROGERS: As far as addressing the backlog, there were two areas that we principally had to manage. There were communities at Mount Wilson. There have been I think at least three meetings there with affected community members to explain the process that we went through and the concern about the back-burns that occurred there. There were also meetings around Conjola to talk to communities around there. They were ones that were outstanding that were highlighted from the inquiry, but we've very much put in place processes to talk to communities after fires.

One of the difficulties we have is where—so, where we are looking at now, for example, where we end up just having such a succession of fires, it becomes problematic to have the time and the resources to go back and then talk to each community about them. You have to wait sometime after, and communities do get a level of frustration. Wherever we can, we are doing it. We are trying to do it better. The Coroner even asked if we could do a little bit more of that up-front to try to save some of the dramas in a coronial coming out. It's absolutely something we want to do, and we want to do better, but it's just about the timing and the resource of when we're able to get that work done. But, certainly, the backlog from the 2019-20 fires I believe has been completed. That's not to say that everybody is happy with that outcome, but I'm saying we've done that community engagement to the best of our ability.

Dr AMANDA COHN: The Mount Wilson and Conjola communities are certainly some of the communities that have reached out to myself, but I just wanted to clarify for my own understanding that, at this point, it's not actually reflected in protocols that that community engagement has to happen across the board moving forward.

ROB ROGERS: Can I take that on notice? I just need to check 100 per cent. I do believe there is that level of requirement, but I just want to confirm that, if I can. The other thing that I would just say that we've been doing over the past three years that has been very successful is, where we've had fires burning in the vicinity of farmland and rural properties, to actually put a dedicated person there to liaise with the rural landholders, because we've also found that that brings a lot of benefits and tries to get them to understand the strategy that we are

employing, and listening to what they're saying to make sure that they have a level of confidence. Community engagement is something that we're doing our best to get a lot better at.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Minister, would you agree that that level of community engagement should actually be happening across the board, rather than waiting for a coronial inquiry to take place?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, community engagement is incredibly important. When you consider the people who make up many of our emergency services volunteers, they are part of that community. There's constant community consultation. I know that, just of late, there have been a number of people in the different parts of the State, whether it's some of our colleagues or community groups—the RFS has led them in terms of engaging with the community and having community meetings. We had our Get Ready Weekend that basically ran all across the State. I know many people in this Parliament from across both Houses were there.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Sorry, I'm going to cut you short, Minister. I fully support Get Ready Weekend as well. We're specifically talking about engagement with affected residents in the context of back-burns.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, of course.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Coming back to the Bushfire Inquiry progress report, I understand there is the development of a four-year plan for fire trail maintenance. When will this be completed and released?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The plan—are you talking about the audit of the bushfire trails?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes. My understanding is that it was to include a four-year plan for maintenance.

Mr JIHAD DIB: So the audit's there, taken back, but what I might do is, specifically to the plan for the four years, refer to that to the commissioner.

ROB ROGERS: If I can put it into context, there are 30,000 kilometres of mapped strategic fire trails across the State. A lot of them have actually got what we call fire access and fire trail plans, or FAFT plans. We've had a lot of delay in getting that work done because of the weather. The successive wet years have caused us massive delays in doing that work. There's around a \$12 million program this year to try to catch up on some of those works, but there's also a lot of work going on to try to repair trails from the wet weather. But it's fair to say that there's a limited amount of machinery that can be brought to bear to get that work done, so it is something that's going to take multi years to get done. I believe the FAFT plans are completed for all of the areas, but then the next stage is to get Public Works to cost them all for us. That work is being done now so that we can obviously have a complete plan, and then that plan can be funded for future years.

Dr AMANDA COHN: What impact is the lack of maintenance of those fire trails expected to have on responses this summer?

ROB ROGERS: There are some critical fire trails that we've identified. We're authorising work to go forward on those. I don't have a list of all the critical ones and what the status of them are, but I can certainly provide an answer on notice as far as the critical trails and the work that's being done to rectify them.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. I think the communities we represent would be interest in having that answer on notice. My last question to you, Commissioner is—and I'm now referring to the Auditor-General's report, not the inquiry report—what prevents the RFS from reporting incident response times?

ROB ROGERS: The difficulty with reporting response times is it depends on—there's a response to an incident and there are response times from the station. We're not saying we don't report, but the point is what we're measuring. It's not about turning up to a station—because quite often you'll have one firefighter who grabbed the truck and then the other firefighters will meet them at the scene—so it's not just a simple answer. We're not saying we're not reporting them, but I think there's debate over what we should be reporting. The measure that we're reporting is the effect on fires. We've got a measure of 80 per cent of fires being kept to less than 10 hectares.² That's a measure that I think is quite important because it doesn't matter how we get there. It's about doing all of those things that are about early detection and fast response. I guess, from my point of view, it's not just a simple matter of how quickly you turn out the door; it's about how quickly you bring down those fires and how small they are.

² In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Hon Jihad Dib MP, Minister for Customer Service and Digital Government, Minister for Emergency Services, and Minister for Youth Justice, clarified the evidence given.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Doctor Cohn—if it's okay, Chair—I will answer the question about the south-west councils. I actually did write back to them. It was about the Menindee that they had written to me. I've asked the Reconstruction Authority also to engage with them to make sure that their voices are heard in any of the next stages of planning. I want to clarify that. Also, as we just heard, fire trails are an ongoing body of work that we're continuously working on. I just wanted to clarify the first letter bit.

The CHAIR: Does the Government have any questions?

The Hon. WES FANG: Come on. Mop up, guys. What have you got? Nothing?

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: No, because we're very satisfied.

The Hon. WES FANG: No blood to mop up? Okay. That's a shame.

The CHAIR: In that case, we will break for a short morning tea break. We will be back at 11.15 a.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back to budget estimates. We now turn to the Opposition for questions.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Good morning, Minister. Thanks for attending today. I would like to talk to you, as the Minister for Emergency Services, about Eugowra. Minister, you've been to Eugowra with Minister Scully. I acknowledge that. On behalf of some of those community members out there, thank you for attending. My question to you, Minister, is: From what you saw firsthand on the ground, you surely would agree that the situation warrants a visit from the New South Wales Premier?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Thanks for acknowledging that I've been out there with the Minister. It was very important to go out there. I made that commitment to the local community, as well as to the local member. As you've seen since I've had the role, I've been travelling as much as I possibly can. I've spent a fair bit of time in the regions. What I saw in Eugowra is what I suppose many people there would refer to as like a mini Lismore, in terms of how quickly the water came through and how the community recovered. One particular thing that really stood out for me, and I can't remember the gentleman's name—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I would like to focus on the question, which is: From your experience firsthand on the ground from your visit a month or so ago, surely it warrants a visit from the Premier to Eugowra?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm sure the Premier will get out there. I know he's had many discussions with the local member of Parliament there and with the community.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, have you recommended to the Premier that he visit Eugowra?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Premier will be visiting Eugowra. I know he will.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Have you also recommended to the Premier that he make the time and visit Eugowra?

Mr JIHAD DIB: What's very clear is that the Premier will go out and visit as many places as he possibly can. Part of the reason that Minister Scully and I went out there was in the same way that we went to other flood- or disaster-affected areas: to be able to meet with people in the first instance. We know that he cannot be everywhere. I'm very confident that he will be visiting Eugowra.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, the Prime Minister of this country has visited Eugowra. He has flagged that he will be visiting Eugowra on a second occasion. He has also called on the Premier of New South Wales to accompany him for a visit to Eugowra. As the Minister for Emergency Services—and I acknowledge your visit—why has our Premier not visited Eugowra, with the 12-month anniversary only two weeks away?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Premier can speak for himself, but I know that he'll be visiting Eugowra.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When? Has the Premier advised you when he'll be visiting Eugowra?

Mr JIHAD DIB: He will be visiting Eugowra and that Central West area. We've spoken about it. He will be there.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's a question you may need to raise with him, Sam.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I would like to reference a media release that was put out last night from the Premier, Minister Scully, Minister Dib and the State member for Orange. Do you want me to table it? This is your media release.

Mr JIHAD DIB: If you want to table it for the rest of the Committee. I'm not sure if the rest of the Committee has seen it.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm happy to table it for the rest of the Committee, but surely you would know what I'm referring to, correct?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The \$50 million announcement to support the Central West community?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I've been inundated with phone calls from people throughout the Cabonne shire. They feel that the way your Government has announced this is nothing short of disrespectful and disingenuous. It was a staged, sham media conference that was filmed here in Sydney two weeks ago by the Premier and given exclusively to only one news outlet in the Central West. No questions can be asked of this media release or that press conference. Surely you can do things better. Surely we owe the communities of Eugowra and the Central West the ability to ask questions when you've put \$50 million on the table. Why have you not visited Eugowra to announce this and to allow the community to ask questions?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Faraway, I have visited Eugowra with Minister Scully.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We've formulated that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: But I just want to give you a little bit of—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, let me redirect the question.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Okay, but can I answer that question?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, because I'm going to redirect the question specifically.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, you've asked me a question; I'd like to answer the question.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I also have the ability to redirect the question, Minister. Why did no-one from the New South Wales Government turn up in the Cabonne shire in the Central West to answer the questions the community have about this \$50 million?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think what's really important is the fact that there was a \$50 million announcement made to support the community in Cabonne shire. We know the experiences that they've had. In going there and visiting firsthand and working with the local community, working with the shire mayors and representatives, and working with the Reconstruction Authority, we came to the view that that community needed some financial support. There's a commitment here of \$50 million. I think the fact of the matter is the commitment that's been made is what's going to really support the community. If it's an issue about the media, the media will ask those questions. But there is also an opportunity for people to ask that question—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I'm going to redirect the question because the media can't ask questions. Because the Premier of this State two weeks ago recorded a staged media conference with the State member for Orange in this building, released it to only one media source—couldn't ask any questions. The community members in Eugowra are walking around ringing each other trying to figure out what are the answers to this question: What comes out of this \$50 million? Who can they ring? Who can they talk to? Their State member is on holidays. The Premier won't visit Eugowra and answer the tough decisions. Minister, you're here before estimates day and this is the only opportunity the Central West community has with these questions to try to get some answers.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Faraway, I again come back to the initial part. The initial part here is there is an excellent announcement of \$50 million to support the Cabonne shire and the local communities. If you're asking, "Can it be done in a different way?", that's a whole other discussion. But if you're saying that we're better off not announcing \$50 million so that somebody can announce it in person, we want to try to get—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, just let—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —I'm going to redirect the question.

Mr JIHAD DIB: You can redirect the question, but I actually do want to answer the question.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order—

Mr JIHAD DIB: You're asking a question—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Minister. There's been a point of order.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The honourable member has asked a question. The Minister is entitled to answer it how he sees fit and in a full and complete way.

The CHAIR: The first part of that point of order is correct. The Minister can answer the question how he sees fit. However, I'm not upholding the point of order because the member also has the ability to redirect the Minister. Minister, I will ask that, if you do start an answer and the member wants to redirect it, you allow the member to redirect that question.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: To the point of order: Under paragraph 19 of the procedural fairness resolution, all witnesses need to be treated with courtesy. Now, asking a question that makes a series of allegations and then not allowing even a small retort or response from the Minister is not courteous. I totally agree with the member's right to redirect. But simply cutting him off before he even has a chance to respond is not acting in a courteous way.

The Hon. WES FANG: Stop running cover. He doesn't need it.

The CHAIR: Order! I will remind the member to be courteous.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, you referenced in your previous answer the council mayors and the community leaders and engaging with the community and supporting the community. Minister, have you advised the mayor of the Cabonne shire of this \$50 million package?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I haven't spoken to him in person. After meeting with the different mayors, we were very clear, or they were very clear to us, that the place of Central West, particularly around Eugowra and the Cabonne area, needed some support. I've met with the mayor a number of times. But if you're asking me did I pick up the telephone and say, "Hey, this is the commitment", then no. But I will say this—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You've answered the question. Thank you and I appreciate that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It was clear also in our budget—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, you haven't spoken to the mayor of the Cabonne shire. He has found out by watching the local news last night that his community is entitled to up to \$50 million in support. So you can see why the community feels that this is a little bit disingenuous, and it is a little bit disrespectful the way you've done it. It's not what you've done—\$50 million dollars on the table is a good start, Minister. But the way you have rolled this out is disrespectful to the Cabonne shire. Minister, have you spoken to any members of the Eugowra flood advisory committee to advise them of this announcement?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Are you asking me questions on behalf of an individual in the community—on behalf of the community?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm asking questions to you as the Minister for Emergency Services.

Mr JIHAD DIB: If you are here trying to say that, because I didn't make a particular phone call then that's actually a major problem, I'll grant there is an issue there. But what I actually want to say is the outcome is \$50 million to support the local community and, in that press release that you've just tabled, we're talking about things that support the community in terms of ways that they can be better prepared—obviously working with local government, working in terms of communities that were affected and people that were affected with damage that was done to their house. If the hang-up—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I acknowledge the \$50 million is a good start—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, I'm really sorry—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I have acknowledged—

Mr JIHAD DIB: —it is a very strong start based on meetings that we had with the local community. We actually went there—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, the local community has a lot of questions.

Mr JIHAD DIB: —and respectfully went out and visited and wanted to hear from them.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: They have a lot of questions and the way that your Government has rolled out this announcement doesn't allow the mayor, doesn't allow community members, doesn't even allow the local media to ask questions. Again, this is a very shabby way that your media team, along with the Premier's office, have rolled this out and I say it can be done better. Now, moving directly to the media release—

Mr JIHAD DIB: If I can respond to that, there will be, of course, an opportunity for those questions and a discussion. It's pretty clear that's in there, but I can't imagine anybody saying, "Do you know what? Don't give us the \$50 million to our community that really needs it because you didn't make a phone call or because you didn't actually give me a chance to ask a question." We can work through those things.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The community would like to know—

Mr JIHAD DIB: And they will.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: —what is included.

Mr JIHAD DIB: You asked me at the outset, Mr Farraway, about visits. I've said there are visits. I said we're working with the community, but what I'm really proud of and I won't walk back from is the fact—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So it's to be advised. Thank you, I appreciate the answer.

Mr JIHAD DIB: —that we've committed \$50 million to support the local community.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm going to redirect the question now. With reference to this media release, it talks specifically about funding for house raising and retrofits. It is fair to say that not all the community want a buyback; people want to stay in their communities in the Central West. That may mean a retrofit or it may mean a house to be raised. But, Minister, what do you have in way of support for the 27 families, the 27 households, that were either demolished or to be demolished that would not be eligible for a retrofit or for their house to be raised if the house is gone?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There's a fair bit of work that's already taking place there. I can have a little bit more detail provided to you as well. If I just ask the CEO of Reconstruction Authority—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, I've got Mr Draper all afternoon.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know, but if you want—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We can cross that—

Mr JIHAD DIB: —the most detailed answer, then I'm saying that I could provide some. However, my opportunity to be able to pass to the CEO of Reconstruction Authority, who can speak specifically to things, is also a way to be able to get those, because I'm not sure if this is about—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I will ask Mr Draper—

Mr JIHAD DIB: —grandstanding or actually about getting an answer.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Minister, I will ask Mr Draper this afternoon some of his thoughts as the CEO of the Reconstruction Authority. But as the Minister for Emergency Services, are you working on a plan for the 27 households that won't be eligible? A retrofit or a house raising won't be the appropriate support. Are you still considering buybacks as part of the recovery package?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That \$50 million is actually quite flexible in terms of addressing what the needs are of the local community and for some of those things—it may be a range for some. It may be a buyback. It may be a raising. It may be a retrofit.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Are buybacks part of the \$50 million?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There's a flexibility to be able to do what works best for the community. When I visited Eugowra itself—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But are buybacks part of the \$50 million? Because it is not stipulated in your media release. It specifically says, "Households will be able to use the funding for house raising and retrofits." Are buybacks included in this \$50 million package?

Mr JIHAD DIB: One of the key things that we've learnt from decisions of the past—I'm not here to throw stones at decisions of the past. But one of the things that we've learnt—because it is always about learning and improving and trying to get better—is that not everything fits straight into a square. Not everything just fits into a box. It's got to be more than a tick-a-box exercise. We have committed that we will work with the local community, that we will work with local people. We want a community-led recovery to ensure that this money

that we have, this \$50 million that we do have, is spent in the way that best suits that. So if that means that buybacks may be provided—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Thank you, Minister. I want to take part of your answer there—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, but if buybacks are—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I think you've answered the question and I thank you for that. One of the concerns that is coming from the ground in the Cabonne shire, Minister, is—they appreciate your visit. We've touched on that. I've acknowledged that. But many members of that community have only been able to spend 1½ hours with you and Minister Scully. They've been able to spend zero time with our Premier. They have been able to speak to the Prime Minister though. One of the concerns is that they have no direct contact with your ministerial office. Following these questions today, would you commit to making someone in your office a dedicated liaison for the Central West communities that are impacted, whether it is Cabonne council or the Eugowra flood advisory committee or some of the community-led groups in Cudal?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Reconstruction Authority is there on the ground. I have met with the mayor; I'm more than happy to meet with the mayor again. They've also got a local member of Parliament who can access me anytime he wants to have meetings, as he has done before.

The Hon. WES FANG: He's on holidays at the moment, isn't he?

Mr JIHAD DIB: As have other members of Parliament who represent that area—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But Minister—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will get to—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The concern is they would like to be able to share their feedback directly with you, Minister. As the Minister for Emergency Services, are you willing to make someone in your office available as a liaison, where if they want to make direct contact with you, Minister, and your office, they can do so? They have not met with you since that 1½-hour meeting, which they appreciated. But, honestly, we owe that community more than a 1½-hour meeting.

Mr JIHAD DIB: People who know me know that I am very open to meeting with people and to visiting. That meeting was one part of a bigger trip where I also met with Minister Scully and other people. I'm more than happy for people to be in contact with us.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You might share the details and we'll pass it on. They would appreciate— and I'm being genuine with this, Minister—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, I am also happy to have a—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I am being genuine with this. I've got really limited time, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm also happy to have that conversation with the mayor. In addition to that, as I said, I will do my travel whenever I possibly can—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We'll pass that on. Minister, I've got limited time. I've got a lot of stuff to get through. I want to move on to the Community Assets package. You've come out with \$50 million. It's a good start, but in the Cabonne region alone there are 118 community infrastructure assets that are damaged, amounting to nearly \$80 million. If Cabonne has \$80 million worth of community assets that are damaged, and if you've got house raising, if you've got retrofit and you are saying today, I assume, that buybacks could be a part of this, you're going to run out of money very quickly. Have you identified which community assets as part of that package are going to be included?

Mr JIHAD DIB: This is where we will work with the local community, with the local groups and with local government. I know that they're also working—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So not yet? You haven't identified which community assets could be a part of this \$50 million?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think what I said there is really important: that we continue working with the Commonwealth Government wherever we possibly can. But locally, also, what's really important—what things are the most prioritised? What can we do in terms of any potential funding down the track? What can we do in terms of partnerships with the Federal Government? What can we do with the local government? What's really clear here is that we want to create a situation where we get the best possible outcome because, together, we've actually discovered what the solution would be. At this point in time we've put in—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So obviously you don't have a list yet; you will work with the community? That's what I'm taking—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I accept that's the answer. Specifically, Minister, your media release states:

- Community projects such as the rebuild of Eugowra's pre-school with Cabonne Shire Council.

Cabonne council has estimated that the cost of the rebuild of the community childcare centre and the long day care is unfunded, and it's a cost of \$6½ million. It is specifically referenced in your media release. Can you confirm that \$6½ million out of this \$50 million fund will be put towards the rebuild of Eugowra's community children's centre and preschool?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think what we can see there—if you just give me a sec, I will give you the exact—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I'm also happy for you to take it on notice if you need to.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can—

The Hon. WES FANG: Or you can table the note—one or the other.

Mr JIHAD DIB: What I can say is it was damaged, obviously, as you know, by the extensive flooding. A temporary preschool was expedited as an interim measure—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: No, but it's a funding—

The Hon. WES FANG: We know the history, Minister. We've been out there.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's a funding issue, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: "Schools infrastructure—shire—the State until the possible"—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's all right. Maybe consider taking it on notice—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can tell you this; this is the bit.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Finally!

Mr JIHAD DIB: The NSW Reconstruction Authority is funding the centre's re-establishment. Cabonne council has approved a development application. The preschool is working with—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So the \$6½ million for the rebuild of the community childcare centre will come out of this \$50 million?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Reconstruction Authority is funding it. It will be—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: It's a yes or no answer.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It will be rebuilt. That's your answer. It will be rebuilt.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Okay, so \$6½ million will be taken out of the \$50 million for the rebuild of this centre. This is a good outcome, Minister. I'm not knocking it. I just want some clarity.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've been as clear as I can, Mr Farraway. It will be—

The Hon. WES FANG: You put the press release out, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I have been as clear as I can: It will be rebuilt.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I have one more question; I have very limited time. Minister, it is so important for the communities, of Eugowra and Canowindra in particular, that an updated flood study is done. There are concerns on the ground that this is being delayed because the State Government has committed funding towards preparing and completing these flood studies but to date the funding hasn't been forthcoming from the New South Wales Government. Can you commit that the New South Wales Government will fund the updated flood studies for both Eugowra and Canowindra?

Mr JIHAD DIB: What I'll do with that answer—because obviously I was going to refer to the CEO, but we've just heard the bell ring. I'm happy for him to answer that in the afternoon for you, if you like?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But do you have an answer? Do you know, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will defer that to the CEO.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Right. You don't know.

The CHAIR: Minister, earlier you and I were talking about the recommendations from the 2018 inquiry report and services that would be funded.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, Chair, is this the diversion one?

The CHAIR: This was the 2018 inquiry into, yes, youth diversionary programs in New South Wales. We were talking about ensuring support services are prioritised and you said that you were wanting to prioritise those services. Will those services be funded and in any way expanded in the next budget, or is that something that you're advocating for?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, I'm very much interested in expanding youth services. I also think that Youth Justice itself is ready for some reform and the time might be right for some reform. We've got some outstanding people in places who believe that there is a chance for reform. I will definitely be advocating for more. We are doing some initial work at the moment. In response to a question that was asked earlier, I will go to every single Expenditure Review Committee and push as hard as I can for the portfolios that I'm responsible for. Definitely we're working on that. There are some things in place with this year's budget, and we will continue for more and more. But I go back to that key point, which is that I'm of the belief—and it's shared by a few others—that the whole youth justice system is actually ready for some reform that has got the intention, primarily, of putting young people's lives on the right track.

The CHAIR: In regards to that reform, the same report also recommended that further research is put into the potential of the justice reinvestment approach in New South Wales. Is that part of your approach for prioritising the portfolio of Youth Justice and moving change in that space?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes. There's a lot to be said for justice reinvestment. There's a lot to be said for conferencing. There's a lot to be said for alternative ways of still having consequences for people who have got themselves into trouble. Overarching all of that is that desire to make sure that they don't actually get to that point to begin with.

The CHAIR: Have you met with Just Reinvest in regard to this?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've had a meeting—I just need to be 100 per cent. I don't want to say to you that I did 100 per cent. Can I get back to you?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know I've spoken to people from Just Reinvest, but whether it's—I'm just trying to get my timing right. But I certainly am aware of the work that they do and I like the work that they do.

The CHAIR: If you haven't met with them, are you willing to?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes. Here we are: I am informed I actually have met with them. I am also then meeting them next month.

The CHAIR: Okay, fantastic.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I just didn't want to give you an answer that I wasn't 100 per cent sure of.

The CHAIR: Given that obviously when you're talking about—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, would you like to—you're more than welcome to join us at that meeting, too.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will reach out.

The CHAIR: In regard to the work around justice reinvestment, obviously those kinds of programs are most impactful when they're actually long-term projects. Is there an effort from your office to advocate for ongoing funding so that those programs can be assured that they've got long-term support?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The way that our budget works—I mentioned a little bit earlier that we're within the greater DCJ, Department of Communities and Justice. We have a part that's for Youth Justice. How we spend that money or allocate that money is based on a number of different factors. One of them is about the reforms that we wish to pursue, the things that we see as really important and where we can do that. I think it's a really important thing there to have any more consultation that we can possibly have and then start moving forward. I think people who know the Youth Justice and the young people space, as Ms MacDonald does, sometimes we just need to get it moving. What we've got here is young people really at risk of having a life that doesn't reach its full potential, because we just spend a little bit too long thinking about what we're going to do. So that is a yes.

The CHAIR: I just want to move over to Emergency Services. You recently announced that disaster assistance will be made available to the Bega Valley shire local government area following the severe bushfires there. Some of the eligible groups for this assistance include primary producers. In the case of animal agriculture producers, is the assistance available, are you aware, for veterinary treatment as part of that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I take that one on notice and just get back to you? I know that the support that's provided is one for—I don't know if it's about veterinary. I'm not sure if the CEO has anything? I could take that one on notice. Some of the support measures—I think that was the natural disaster declaration. It is also in partnership with the Commonwealth. I'm happy to take that one on notice if you're fine with that and get back to you on that, if that's okay?

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be really useful.

Mr JIHAD DIB: We will try for this afternoon. If we can't get it to you this afternoon, we'll put it down as one on notice.

The CHAIR: Fantastic, thank you. I asked in another portfolio—over in Portfolio Committee 4 we are doing an inquiry into the veterinary shortage and a lot of these issues are coming up. While I understand a lot of those issues do fall under Agriculture, given there is that mix here with Emergency Services, that's where I'm curious to make sure that that is included.

Mr JIHAD DIB: And we did work with the Department of Primary Industries, who were able to get stock feed out there really quickly. It was a really good example of how different agencies work well together to try and make sure that we got the support to people as quickly as possible. I made the point earlier that we're learning from everything that we've done in the past and we're trying to continuously improve. We had that declaration out really quickly and the support out really quickly. But I'm happy to follow that up. It may be with DPI, but I give you my word that we will follow it up.

The CHAIR: The fires also obviously bring a lot of devastation for wildlife and that puts a lot of pressure on wildlife carers and, again, veterinarians. Does your department take those stakeholders into account in terms of disaster assistance or have you met with the environment Minister on that particular issue?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, Chair, just the heart of the question? I missed it, sorry.

The CHAIR: The fires also bring a lot of devastation to native wildlife and that obviously puts a lot of pressure on carers who were caring for that wildlife and veterinarians, again. I'm asking has your department actually taken those issues into account in terms of disaster assistance and/or have you met with the environment Minister on this as well?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I haven't met with the environment Minister specifically on this issue. But, obviously, we take into account livestock when it comes to fires. I know that there's also discussions that happen with different groups, particularly when it comes to hazard reduction. We know that the Black Summer fires obviously took a really terrible toll. But I just say that the responsibilities for that fall under the State Emergency Management Committee and Environmental Services Functional Area and they focus on the protection of the environment, and obviously all parts of the environment. Did you want to know anything about the hazard reduction, what we do?

The CHAIR: No. You mentioned livestock. You only consider livestock but you don't consider wildlife. Is that what you're saying?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No, sorry. I said livestock because that was just in my mind, because I mentioned earlier about the livestock, the feed. But the RFS partners with agencies to protect wildlife when conducting hazard reduction burns, particularly in relation to koala populations, and also working with wildlife rescue groups to ensure that they can recover injured animals as soon as safe to do so.

The CHAIR: The department of emergency services specifically considers wildlife as well?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The department of—I'm talking about RFS, and we would consider wildlife as well, but also National Parks and Wildlife Service establish a technical adviser wildlife role for the incident management team. We set up an incident management team when there is one on and there is somebody there who is specifically helping and their role is to assist in terms of informing wildlife response to bushfire and other emergencies. There is actually somebody there from National Parks and Wildlife with the focus specifically on wildlife.

The CHAIR: It just seems that wildlife is often falling between the gaps, because a lot of these volunteers are having to do all the work pro bono. They're not assisted by the department of environment; they're not assisted by the department of emergency services. Do you think that there is value in actually broadening the scope of

disaster assistance specifically within the criteria to make sure that that's given proper consideration in some of these disaster emergency responses?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think having somebody on the response committee is really important and certainly something that we can look into. I take on board what you said, particularly about the fact that people are doing it pro bono, and volunteers. There is an incredible amount of people who volunteer for all sorts of things. But, I'll be pretty frank with you, I'm not 100 per cent sure of that one. There are people who have been trained, have been accredited in that area and we have also got many of our firefighters, the actual firefighters—there is about 700 who have actually been trained effectively in wildlife first aid.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I understand that in May this year the RFS called on the New South Wales Government to ensure members have full access to treatment for potential post-traumatic stress disorders. We're currently hearing in the health committee's inquiry into community outpatient mental health how difficult it can be to access that kind of service, particularly as the Government is seeking to increase the volunteer base for more frequent and severe disasters. What is the current system for PTSD support for emergency service volunteers?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There is investment of approximately \$17 million over five years. It is about ensuring that we have employed an additional 18 allied health professionals, including psychologists, support, clinical and organisational services. The RFS released a new mental health strategy that is developed in consultation with its membership, key stakeholders and respected experts in the field, including the centre for post-traumatic stress at Melbourne university. We've expanded the member assistance program to also provide volunteers and families with access to free counselling. We're taking a proactive approach with Critical Incident Support Services. And if I can add, I remember earlier this year I said to people we've also got to be better at reaching out in terms of saying it's okay to seek a bit of help, it's okay to say that you're struggling a little bit. There's been a fair bit of work.

There's trauma-specific clinical care. Wellbeing is such a priority for us. Mental health and wellbeing has got to be a priority, particularly to volunteers and personnel. We have already got claims that allow for up to \$10,000 in medical expenses, and we're continuing to work through everything that we can. There are programs that are targeting PTSD specifically and the RFS is working to ensure that they use all of this information that we've got, all the additional resources. But one of the biggest challenges as well is to get people to check in on one another, but also if somebody is not travelling so well, that there is no shame in saying, "I'm not doing okay, I'm struggling a little bit." So we're using the most proactive approach that we possibly can. I'm not sure if there is anything that the commissioner would like to add?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. In the interests of time I'm satisfied that you've answered my question.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Okay, because I was just going to say—

Dr AMANDA COHN: While I appreciate that these events took place before your Government came to be in power, I have some questions about the engagement of the consulting firm Critical Management Group Pty Ltd by Fire and Rescue between 2017 and 2021. How much in total did Fire and Rescue NSW pay to CMG to assist in creating their 2018 to 2021 corporate plan?

Mr JIHAD DIB: As you prefaced, this is an issue that's arisen well before my time as the Minister, and also before we came into government. We've also had changes in terms of leadership with Fire and Rescue NSW as well. I will take this opportunity to congratulate the new commissioner, Jeremy Fewtrell, on his appointment. I can take that question on notice if you like, in terms of the specific funding.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I have a number of other questions regarding how that contract—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Is that related to that particular contract?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure. I will try this. Some I will answer where I can, and others obviously I have got to be able to say that there are things that I can't answer because it's not there for me and maybe during I may also ask Fire and Rescue to add anything they want to.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I understand that a 2021 ICAC investigation had sufficient evidence to say that there was a decision made by Fire and Rescue NSW to engage CMG, somewhere between May and June 2017. Can that contract be made publicly available?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The contract that you're referring to is—yes, it was referred to ICAC. We're talking 2017, so quite some time ago. ICAC has also asked Fire and Rescue to investigate as well—independently investigate. What I might do is, to give you a more fulsome answer, if I could that on notice, and that way I can provide you with the steps that were taken and what's happening there?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. Whether or not there was a contract, do you know who authorised the payment to CMG?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I don't and said that I don't.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You don't know or you're taking it on notice?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I could take it on notice. I don't know. You're asking me a question from six years before I became a Minister.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Sure. I understand that these matters took place before your Government came into power. I'm interested to know if you can make a commitment to investigate the process that led to this quite controversial company and contract undertaking this work for Fire and Rescue NSW.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've heard these questions before. I know there's been a process. I'm happy if you want Fire and Rescue to provide any additional information. But the matter that you're referring to has actually been looked at by ICAC. It had been referred. It had been dealt with. It was something seven years ago. It's been look at by ICAC. I'm not sure how much more I can add to that, given that this was six years before I became a Minister and before we were even in government.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'd appreciate any efforts that you can make with the questions on notice. I appreciate it was before you became the Minister. There is still some unrest in the community about this issue.

Mr JIHAD DIB: My focus really is about moving forward with the agency. I'm really glad that we've got the appointment of a substantive commissioner in Jeremy Fewtrell, who is a great example of what can happen. This is a person who joined and has risen through the ranks. He's well respected. He and his team, which is a great team, will look at moving the agency forward. That's what I want to do. Governance and management is a big part of where it is that we need to do some work.

Dr AMANDA COHN: On a completely different topic, are there any plans for upgraded or additional Neighbourhood Safer Places?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The Neighbourhood Safer Places—I can refer that to the commissioner, if that's all right? There's a bit of a context around that as well. Commissioner, are you okay to talk about the Neighbourhood Safer Places?

ROB ROGERS: Certainly. There's around a thousand Neighbourhood Safer Places around the State. Indeed, we're actively looking for more. There's a particular prescription we put around them, to make sure people are going to be safe if we're encouraging them to go there. We've been doing a trial on turning a fire station into a Neighbourhood Safer Place because during the 2019-20 fires, there was quite a number of instances where the only—particularly in the more remote communities, the only place they could go was to the local fire station. Indeed, that was really the only public building in the area. We've been doing one at Bellbird, trying to build that, and we've done that as a trial. We've got another few we're going to roll out to prove the concept, but it is a complex process.

It's one thing having the building, but the other part of it is access, because quite often when the community needs it the firefighters are out. So we're trying to work out a system of how they get access to it and make sure—the last thing we can afford to have is people go somewhere and then not being able to go in there. They're the things we're working through. In the next 12 months we'll have a good understanding of the viability of fire stations as Neighbourhood Safer Places.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I appreciate this part may need to be taken on notice, but are you aware of any new or upgraded Neighbourhood Safer Places in the Hawkesbury local government area?

ROB ROGERS: No, I might have to take that on notice if I can, please.

Dr AMANDA COHN: While the commissioner is here—you were trying to defer the part of the question about post-traumatic stress disorder management. I'd be happy to hear that answer.

ROB ROGERS: As the Minister said, since 2019 and 2020 there has been a substantial amount of work in employing psychologists, expanding our mental health support. Last year we had some 13 claims for PTSD and the workers comp claims. It is fair to say that if you go back to 2019-20, I think there's a lot of people that were impacted by those fires who haven't necessarily put in claims. There's still a lot of pain in the community from that fire season. We've seen fires occur both in the north of the State and the southern part down near Bega already this fire season. The amount of community anxiety that it has raised is absolutely considerable. We're trying to be mindful of that in the way we communicate with people. We're trying to raise the alert but not to panic

people. It's a really delicate balancing act we have about making sure people understand the gravity of the situation but not triggering them. It is a challenge, and that will be a challenge for us for some many years.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I appreciate the answer that's been provided in the context of our formal agencies and formal volunteers. Does that support also extend to, for example, the VRA or to spontaneous or informal volunteers in disaster situations?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The formality in terms of what?

Dr AMANDA COHN: In terms of the PTSD support.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can find out if there's a formal arrangement, but I do know that the VRA and all the other volunteers do an incredible amount of work, but the support will be there. We're also doing a number of things at the moment, particularly in how we support spontaneous volunteering. It's really important for us, as I said in one of the points earlier, that if anybody—especially those who are volunteering and giving up their time for community, their mental health and wellbeing is paramount. We'll make sure that we continue looking after them as best we can.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'd appreciate the answer on notice to that part of the question about the volunteers outside of our formal agencies.

Mr JIHAD DIB: So volunteers outside of formal?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Outside of the RFS and SES.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure. Okay.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'll take the first five minutes and then I will hand over to my colleague Wes Fang, who I'm sure will be timing me.

The Hon. WES FANG: Like a hawk.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You recently came out in support of competition reforms in the eConveyancing market. When can we expect competition in that market?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The competition reform there is a big step forward. We're building on some work that had already existed. New South Wales is one of the national leaders here. We have set up the ARNECC, which is the national body of the registrars general. Basically we're trying to create a sense of interoperability. We've had day one, which is really good. That was a big milestone point. The next one will be what they're referring to as day two. I'm convening—and I'm happy to be doing that—a panel, effectively like a ministerial meeting, or meeting with other Ministers, as well as some of the different stakeholders about how we're progressing with that. I can give you the dates if you would like.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Sure. Are they like deadlines that you're putting in?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes. It's a reform deadline that we're putting in. Obviously, we'll try to get to it before that. Given that it's eConveyancing, you kind of can't take risks. So we'll have to do a close bit and make sure we get it right. This is a important reform, and I'm happy that we'll be leading the way in the country on this one. We're talking it will take about a year or so. I can give you a year and a bit, but we do have solid dates that ARNECC, which is the national body, has basically set, and now we're working to—those dates have to be met, if I can put it that way.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In November last year the Parliament passed legislation which gave the Registrar General greater enforcement powers. Will they be used to keep the reforms on track?

Mr JIHAD DIB: The reforms are incredibly important and they're required, but what comes with that is also an ability to enforce what it is. So, yes, the Registrar General will have those. It's important too. We won't be walking back from that.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So you've got some deadlines—

Mr JIHAD DIB: And enforcement, so that will take place. Also, the other one that I think we should be proud of as a State is that we're leading it across the nation. We're hosting. I could be wrong, but this may be the first time all Ministers and Territory leaders are coming together. It's a really important point. It's a really good reform about interoperability. Also, ultimately too, this will lower the cost of conveyancing, which is so important. It comes down to what's good for the community.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So cost of living?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You will put those dates, on notice?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think they're public.

EMMA HOGAN: We can take it on notice.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: As part of the award negotiations for Fire and Rescue, did you sign off that medical examinations of safety-critical employees were now to be conducted by a GP, whereas previously medical examinations were conducted by a qualified occupational medical officer? Did you sign off on that? To me, it seems to be a work health and safety issue, given that the reason that they had an occupational medical officer do the examinations was as a result of the inquiry into the Waterfall train disaster.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It was part of the award negotiations, and that was part—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And you signed off on it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It was part of the award negotiations.

The Hon. WES FANG: I want to pass my congratulations to Mr Fewtrell on the new gig. Just talking, if we can, about the former commissioner, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: On 17 July the former commissioner was dismissed from the role and has been replaced, obviously, now. We are due to commence the fire season. What do we know about the actual removal of the former commissioner, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think it was pretty—it was public. I made an announcement at the time, and I spoke to him. I came to that decision after a while of being in the role because I determined that it was the right time to bring in a new leadership. At the time as well, you would recall, it was done in a very respectful manner and in a courteous manner, but I think what was pretty clear was that I wanted a new leadership and I wanted to pursue some other sustainability things. I think that was fine.

The Hon. WES FANG: I know, Minister, that you're a very collaborative sort of a guy. You went out to Eugowra—the Premier hasn't, obviously—and a few other things. You had a number of meetings with the FBEU. I think you had five meetings between 1 April and 30 June. Did you discuss the commissioner's suitability in the role in any of those meetings?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I have a lot of meetings, and I see it in the disclosure—

The Hon. WES FANG: So do I, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know.

The Hon. WES FANG: I imagine if you're talking about—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I disclose mine. I don't know who you're meeting with.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, a lot of people that give me information to sort of nail you but, anyway, that's the way we go.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm sure they would.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm sure you would remember. You're talking about nailing a former commissioner because you don't like him—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think that language is not right. I think, certainly—

The Hon. WES FANG: You sacked him.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I came with the view that I wanted to move in a different direction.

The Hon. WES FANG: Why is that, though? How did you come to that conclusion, Minister? Was it the FBEU's lobbying?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, I think the path that you're going down—the FBEU's view on the former commissioner, who at the time I also thanked him for his services and said that it was appreciated, was pretty well known. It was pretty clear well preceding my time. What I will say is that he was treated with respect, with courtesy, and I worked through it with him, and it was a view that he understood. To try and make it about that this was a decision because somebody told me to do it, I think, is just pulling it one too far.

The Hon. WES FANG: We will see. Did you discuss his suitability at all in any of those five meetings? I haven't had an answer to that question yet.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, about the meetings. I meet with a range of people and with all stakeholders. Obviously—

The Hon. WES FANG: And there were five meetings.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Of course. But, Mr Fang—

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you discuss at any of those five meetings with the FBEU—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Let me answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: You have sort of been obfuscating, and I just want to get a very distinct answer. Did you or did you not discuss it? Yes or no?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Discuss what?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, did you discuss the former commissioner with the FBEU in any of the five meetings that you had with them?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I—

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes or no, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We discussed a range of things. Mr Fang, we—

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes or no?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will tell you what we discussed. We discussed—

The Hon. WES FANG: I think you would remember it, Minister. It wasn't that long ago.

Mr JIHAD DIB: If you're asking about whether it had come up, of course—

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you discuss the former commissioner?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It would come up in discussion, yes—

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. Thank you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: As would, Mr Fang, issues around the award, as would issues about how we move forward, as would issues about how we protect our firefighters.

The Hon. WES FANG: So it came up. I'm redirecting now, Minister, and I'm allowed to do that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: So, yes, it came up. When a Labor colleague in the LC was asked what role did the FBEU have in the termination of the previous commissioner's employment, the answer given on notice was, "None." But the secretary's own evidence in the five meetings you had prior—but to the secretary's own evidence, do you agree that it seems unlikely that you were not seeking advice on the issue?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Absolutely none did they have—this inference that the FBEU said, "This is what you need to do"—no, it's not. I haven't hidden the fact, as it has been publicly declared, as is my responsibility as a Minister, who I meet with in terms of disclosures. But that was not where the influence—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, here's the thing. Comments by the FBEU have suggested that there could be evidence of cultural, systemic issues in the financial management and a lack of transparency within that organisation. Would you agree that the agency has a cultural issue in this regard? What would you have implemented to address this?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Firstly, I would not seek or take the advice of someone in relation to the removal of a commissioner. The second point, what you've discussed here—

The Hon. WES FANG: You wouldn't?

Mr JIHAD DIB: In terms of what you have implied with the union. What you have discussed here is the issue of publicly made statements by the union. Now, the union itself has spoken for themselves, and they can speak for themselves. But that advice that you're sort of talking about here, that they're saying that there were cultural issues, Mr Fang, I think that's pretty clear. We've seen the situation where Fire and Rescue had overspent the budget by an incredible amount of money for a number of years. We had some concerns around the issues

with the sustainability of the model. So any inference that you're making that this was done for a particular reason, it's not right. But what I really want you to know is that—you know, there's an overtime bill, \$56 million, because the total number of firefighters actually went backwards. How did we get to that situation?

The Hon. WES FANG: You see, I was asking you questions previously, Minister, about—

Mr JIHAD DIB: You were in government, remember?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I was asking you questions about the overtime before and you really didn't know what was in the agreements for overtime in relation to—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will take that as a comment because I think you're—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, it seems like you're cherrypicking one bit from here and one bit from there to try to cover up for your Government's budget cuts and the failures and taking direction from the unions in relation to who you appoint as commissioner. But, anyway, Minister, I'm going to move on.

Mr JIHAD DIB: No, no. I'm sorry, I'm just going to respond to that, because I actually found that offensive.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, I actually found that offensive.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, Minister, you can take offence in about nine minutes when my time is up.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I take a point of order again. It's the same point.

The CHAIR: Yes, I think that's a fair point of order. I think the Minister wanted to make a point, and I would invite the Minister to respond to the comments that were made by the Hon. Wes Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you can make your point. Briefly as possible, please.

Mr JIHAD DIB: The comment that you just made implied that I did remove the commissioner because of what somebody else had done. You basically—

The Hon. WES FANG: That's exactly right, yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's exactly right, is it?

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Well, I'm here to tell you that you are 100 per cent wrong.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: And I'm here to tell you that I made the decision, as the Minister, over a number of different factors, the least of which was the fact that I felt that we needed a new direction, that we wanted fresh leadership and that, as an organisation, I was very concerned about the sustainability that had taken place in terms of overgoing the budget by a fair number of time—the overtime, the culture that I was feeling could have been improved. So that inference—not only inference; you basically said it. That's why I've said that I think that's wrong.

The Hon. WES FANG: The FBEU were pretty strong in their desire to have him removed, and then, all of a sudden, a Labor Minister has appointed a new boss.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Why is it you dislike unions and workers so much, Mr Fang? Why is it?

The Hon. WES FANG: I don't dislike unions and workers so much. But you are the Minister, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: You spent your time earlier talking about the 4 per cent—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, you are the Minister. You are not supposed to be taking directions—you are supposed to be taking advice, but you are not supposed to be a union puppet, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Wow! Mr Fang, I actually thought you were better than that, and you know me better than that.

The Hon. WES FANG: I am better than that, Minister, and I'm here holding you to account.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Unfortunately—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm here holding you to account for the good people of New South Wales. That's my job, Minister. You can try and talk over me, but I've got more questions, Minister.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order—

Mr JIHAD DIB: You're the one who's talking over me.

The CHAIR: There has been a point of order taken.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The member knows very well that he has to treat the Minister with the due respect that he deserves.

The Hon. WES FANG: It goes both ways.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: He is not doing that at the moment, and I ask you to call him to order.

The CHAIR: I uphold the point of order. I think that it is getting disrespectful, and I ask the member to move on.

Mr JIHAD DIB: To that point, Mr Fang, I know that you've got a job to do, but I don't appreciate the mischaracterisations of the work that I do. You well and truly know the work that I do, the way that I conduct myself and the way that I conduct things. I find it offensive that you would make a claim to say, "You were told to do this." I am really sorry, Mr Fang—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm only going off the evidence that I can look at. I'm going off the evidence; I'm going off the public record. I'm asking questions.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Listening to you, Mr Fang, you would think that no problem existed until the moment of March 2023. That's not the case.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I can tell you that the problems have gotten worse since your Government has come in. It has gotten worse because of the budget cuts; it has gotten worse because you've got Ministers who don't know what they're doing. You might be one of the good ones, Minister, and that's saying something given all the problems I've listed so far. But I will move on, Minister. Was the FBEU—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I think you've just got your grab for your social media post today, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: It's not about grabs, Minister; it's about holding the Government to account.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I am here to answer your questions, but it seems to me like you're—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm trying to ask them, but you keep talking over me, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It seems to me like you're grandstanding, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: I do not grandstand, Minister; that is not my style.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can we put that to a vote?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, was the FBEU consulted in the recruitment of the new commissioner?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No. Let me tell you about the process because I am very proud—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I am redirecting, Minister. I am permitted to do so. Does the FBEU have—

Dr AMANDA COHN: Point of order: Members are entitled to redirect the question, but you've redirected it before the Minister had even said anything.

The Hon. WES FANG: The Minister is trying to obfuscate all of this, so I'm going to move on.

The CHAIR: No, sorry. There has been a point of order taken. I did hear the Minister give an answer of no. If the member is satisfied with that answer, then I do believe he can redirect.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, recommendation 12 of the 2022 flood inquiry recommended the merging of the back-office and corporate functions of the RFS and SES. Why has the Government not proceeded with the merger? Quick, get him a note. He needs a note.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I don't need a note and I probably don't need a smart alec comment like that. Mr Fang, as you know, with that inquiry there were a number of recommendations that were made. Some were accepted; others were accepted in principle. From my time as the shadow Minister, I made it clear that a merger of Fire and Rescue and the SES was not something that I thought would actually have beneficial outcomes. Since becoming Minister, that has only reaffirmed my view. Again, volunteers of SES and RFS do an extraordinary job. They join those two services because they believe in contributing to the community in that particular way.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've only got four minutes left, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: That's fine. I've got three minutes to speak.

The Hon. WES FANG: I know you do, and I'm going to redirect you now because I have got—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Wang, I'm not sure—

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you just call me Mr Wang?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry.

The Hon. WES FANG: Dear God. Of all people, Minister. This is how rattled you are. Honestly, Minister. Kamper clearly isn't very articulate, but you should know better.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Kamper's been SMSing him.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Point of order: The honourable member only has three minutes and 40 seconds, so I urge him to use it.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's my clip for social media, Minister.

The CHAIR: The member may want to go on to his questions.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I thought we were here to ask about budget estimates, not to look for clips for social media.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I've got more questions. Unless you want to come back this afternoon, I've got more questions for you.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Some of us are here to answer seriously, but if you're looking for a clip on social media, that's a real problem, Mr Fang.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I'm not. If I wanted one, that would be the one, but I don't. That's not how I operate. Minister, as per the recommendations, has the Government established a dedicated intelligence unit?

Mr JIHAD DIB: A dedicated intelligence unit?

The Hon. WES FANG: As per the recommendations of the flood inquiry.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I take that one on notice?

The Hon. WES FANG: Sure.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Thank you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Has the Government established a planning unit to better help better prepare communities and New South Wales—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can you just slow down with the questions?

The Hon. WES FANG: You've used all my time, Minister. That is the problem.

Mr JIHAD DIB: How have I used your time? It has been you, with your stopping and starting, who has been using all of your time.

The Hon. WES FANG: Has the Government established a planning unit to better help prepare the community?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I might refer that one to the SES, if that's okay.

The Hon. WES FANG: We can cover that off this afternoon. But you don't know, Minister. Is that what you're saying?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry?

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you not aware, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm aware that we're working our way through the recommendations. Obviously there were a number of recommendations that came from the independent inquiry into the floods. We know that those situations of the floods were the biggest natural disasters that we've faced.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I'm going to have to keep moving.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I was just giving you an answer there.

The Hon. WES FANG: Has the Government established a full-time SES position for each of the high-risk catchments to ensure flood identification response for assets and supporting infrastructure is serviced, operational and ready to deploy?

Mr JIHAD DIB: That was a long question.

The Hon. WES FANG: It was. Have we done it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I want to refer that—

The Hon. WES FANG: It could be a short answer, if you like.

Mr JIHAD DIB: You keep interrupting me. I will refer that one to the SES. I know that that's something that you'd prefer to maybe take on notice or something. But do you remember back in 2017 the Government that you were part of actually reduced the number of zones, which meant that we did not actually have the coverage that was required, Mr Fang?

The Hon. WES FANG: No more blame for us, Minister. No more ducking and weaving, please. Come on. I've only got a minute and a half left.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, with that minute and a half, we put in an additional two zones to work with the communities.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm going to redirect, Minister. The back-office merger would have resulted in increased capability. Has the Government increased resources to the SES or RFS to provide commensurate increases in the capabilities that the merger would have given the people of New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've been very clear that we're looking at interoperability opportunities. So where you might believe that merging is the best option, I actually believe that interoperation is a really good option. We are working with all of the agencies.

The Hon. WES FANG: How are you doing that with budget cuts, Minister?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We are interoperating.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've cut the budgets across the board. Cuts, cuts, cuts.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I will clarify it for you. Interoperation actually means that agencies can work together on different things and they can be trained in the same things. If you consider, for example, the communication system, we've done a lot of work on that.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that, Minister.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm answering your question.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that.

Mr JIHAD DIB: We've done a lot of work in terms of interoperability. There will be work in terms of dispatch. That's actually the best way to move forward. People can still maintain—

The Hon. WES FANG: One last question in the 30 seconds—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I also remind you that our SES budget did go up by 34 per cent this year. So for all of your talk about the other stuff—34 per cent.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, are there any plans to cross-train the RFS volunteers in flood rescue, as per the flood inquiry recommendations?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, you would have known that that is already taking place. There is some work that we are doing.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know that the SES, for example—and I do hope you ask the commissioner that question later because she'll be able to answer that. Can I refer to the recent miscellaneous bill where we're also talking about—it went through, with the support of your party, which I appreciate—the opportunities, particularly in some of the more remote areas, to be able to develop a multiskilled unit so that we can also have people who have skills across all of the different agencies. That's what is called interoperability. What you want is to merge; what I want is interoperability, so we can actually have as many people skilled in as many things as possible so that we can actually get the best outcome. If there is a fire and you're in the SES, you can't help; if there's a flood and you're

in the RFS, you can't help. We want as many people to have as many skills as possible, while still maintaining the core agency that they want to support.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yet you're slashing budgets and not giving them any—

The CHAIR: Order!

Mr JIHAD DIB: I just said 34 per cent—

The Hon. WES FANG: Come on, Minister!

The CHAIR: We are now moving to crossbench time. I'll take you back to some of the questions I was asking before around emergency services. I'm just wondering how, as the Minister for Emergency Services, you're ensuring that there's proper coordination between the different arms of emergency response, including the different agencies responsible for assisting humans, assisting animals and assisting property?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We have the State Emergency Management Plan, we have the SEOCON and there are emergency management committees that meet on a basis. Only about a month ago, I think, myself and the Premier joined one of the meetings. All of the agencies are working in collaboration as to what they're working on, what's going on at that particular time and how they can best respond. There is really great coordination that goes through. There's also the safety rescue board, which works together and meets as commissioners. I meet with each of them individually. I think it is about once every couple of weeks, on average, that I meet with each one individually, and we will continue working that way. We've got coordination. The Reconstruction Authority plays a really important role. We have also got the SERCON and the SEOCON. They all fit under what they call the SERM Act, or the State Emergency and Rescue Management Act.

The CHAIR: We talked a little bit before—you said you hadn't met with the environment Minister about wildlife. Have you met with the agriculture Minister at all around the connection with farmed animals in emergency responses?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No, I haven't.

The CHAIR: Do you plan to meet with either of those Ministers in regards to disaster response management to make sure it is all working in collaboration?

Mr JIHAD DIB: They feed in some information and are also involved in terms of some of the collaboration with the different agencies, and we'll feed into that. But if I get an opportunity with them individually, I will. But I do know that they do have a voice that's heard. National parks and wildlife, for example, is involved in the committees. I know that DPI plays a really important role and is also involved in some of our responses to things as well.

The CHAIR: I want to move on to segregation of children in Youth Justice Centres. In October 2022 the New South Wales Ombudsman reported a 46 per cent rise in periods of segregation lasting more than 24 hours in Youth Justice Centres during the 2021-22 financial year. As the new Minister for Youth Justice, what steps have you taken to ensure that these rates of prolonged segregation are reduced?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We've had some discussions about what happens in youth detention centres, and at the very heart of that is making sure that we treat young people in a way that helps them the most. What I can say is that it is down overall from 6.9 instances of segregation per hundred young people per day from 2018-19 to 1.7. So we've really dropped the instances of segregation.

The CHAIR: That's overall instances of segregation? Because what I'm looking at specifically is segregation lasting more than 24 hours, and the fact that in 2021-22 there was a rise in those really long segregation periods. Is that something you've been briefed on?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Is it okay if I refer to the secretary for the detail on that?

The CHAIR: Yes.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Thank you, Minister. Certainly segregation and restrictive practices are both monitored, as they should be, at granular level. Clearly the oversight of those practices is also critical. Can I suggest, Chair, that through the afternoon we measure these things. They are actively discouraged, as I say. If I can work through, with support, the data this afternoon and talk about what we're seeking to do to further reduce those practices, that might be useful to the Committee.

The CHAIR: That would be really useful. Thank you very much for that. Minister, I'm wondering if you've received any briefing on the issue of prolonged segregation?

Mr JIHAD DIB: On that specific one, I can't recall. I know I've been briefed on a number of things around segregation and about the numbers. But in terms of specifically prolonged, I'm not sure.

The CHAIR: The Public Interest Advocacy Centre has argued that any young person subject to a Detainee Risk Management Plan, which will often involve segregation, should be provided with access to a psychologist at a minimum of once per week out of their cell. Is this something that is currently provided in New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm not sure that's currently provided. I can't answer that one specifically, but what I can say is that we do have—I visited the Frank Baxter youth detention centre recently. I know Ms MacDonald has been there as well. You haven't? But you're up that way. You've been to—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Cobham.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I was really happy seeing there some of the recommendations from things that have happened in the past. One was a therapeutic unit that is about helping young people in a therapeutic way. Obviously, that involves different levels of mental health support and counselling and so forth.

The CHAIR: Is that available specifically? As I said, people who are placed on a Detainee Risk Management Plan and are subject to segregation, I assume that they are prime candidates for speaking to a psychologist. Are they prioritised in regards to those therapeutic and rehabilitation programs that you're mentioning?

Mr JIHAD DIB: They're supported by psychologists and youth workers—yes, absolutely.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes, they are.

The CHAIR: The PIAC has also suggested that any plan that involves segregation at a mandatory minimum requires six hours of time out of cell per day, including one hour of physical activity and time outdoors. This seems very reasonable and a very basic request. Is that something that you're willing to consider or look into for New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I take that on notice? Because part of that is also wanting to know exactly what it is that we're doing. I don't want to say we'll take it on notice if we're already doing it. That's one that might be for me to get back to you on, maybe even this afternoon if we have it. I have to say that the work that's being done in youth detention centres by the youth officers is absolutely phenomenal. Every time I go there—I know the shadow Minister would agree—you leave pretty inspired by the genuine concern and the genuine effort of those youth officers, who are trying to do their very best with kids, many of them are broken kids who are trying to rebuild their lives, and they're bringing communities together.

I know that they're doing everything they can. That's why I don't want to give you the answer if I know that programs like that would be operating. But from what I've seen, and the passion and the commitment that they've shown, I know that they will do everything they can to support young people, particularly those who are in youth detention while they're under their care. It's actually really inspiring when you leave. It makes you want to do better to make sure that no-one ends up not having the best opportunity in life.

The CHAIR: As you would know, the Children (Detention Centres) Act does not allow for more than three hours of segregation without approval and requires reporting of segregation. I'm wondering, with that in mind, what sort of steps are being taken within this space? Is that something that's on one of your priority lists, to help move away from the fact that prolonged segregation seems to still be on the up?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may clarify my earlier response, we have 42 psychologists working with Youth Justice. It goes without saying—and I know this Committee would appreciate that these are very troubled young people—that within that cohort, there are clearly different levels of challenge. This particular group who are subject to segregation, bearing in mind that the segregation rate has reduced by 82 per cent over four years, are given priority of access to those 42 psychologists.

The CHAIR: Minister, did you have something additional to add to this as well?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I was going to say that all of our young people have access to Justice Health. Obviously we prioritise things in terms of the complexity of the cases. I speak for everyone on this Committee, I'm sure, when I say there's an inspiration to try to do things for young people, especially for those who are the most vulnerable, because they haven't had the same opportunities that we've had. But that doesn't mean that there isn't hope.

The CHAIR: I have one more question. I want to ask about the Pet Registry and microchipping, because I know that this was something of high interest for Minister Dominello. My understanding was that the project was funded by Digital Government. I'm wondering what sort of oversight you have of this program rolling out—

I know it's also part of Local Government—whether there's any further funding that has been flagged that's needed, and whether that will come from Digital Government.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's overseen by the Office of Local Government. We had that meeting, remember, a little while ago about it. I'm really happy to see that we're going to get there and that we've done our closed pilot. The Office of Local Government oversees it and it's got the funding to get it going. Hopefully in the not-too-distant future we'll be able to say, "Yes, we're ready to go live." But it's been developed, been trialled and should be ready to go. We're aiming, I think, for the early to middle part of 2024, so it's really at the last bit. I think it's going to be a really important thing. I've got to say—sorry to take up all the time, Dr Cohn. As a recent foster dad of a new cat—I never thought I'd be a cat person—I'm really looking forward to registering our own cat on this as well.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you saying your cat's not registered?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's funny, our young daughter got a cat.

The Hon. WES FANG: "Minister fails to register cat"—there's a story.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Sorry, I love chatting about pets, but I've got some far more important questions for today, if that's okay.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know, but I've fallen in love with this cat.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Earlier this morning you tried to talk about fish deaths when I was asking about something else. I am now asking about the Chief Scientist's independent review into the fish deaths in the Darling-Baaka at Menindee. What's the time line for the development of the NSW Mass Fish Death Sub Plan, which was recommended to include a specific Menindee appendix under the Emergency Management Plan for New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I can tell you on that one—this is the independent review into the Menindee fish deaths—we're obviously looking at an independent inquiry into fish deaths. The Chief Scientist and Engineer led this review. That review is obviously something that we'll respond to.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Another recommendation of the Chief Scientist's independent review was an assessment of emergency management, including a "review of membership and training; assessment of current prevention and response resourcing, capability and volunteer capacity" in in Menindee. What's the time line for that to take place?

Mr JIHAD DIB: As you know, last week one of the miscellaneous legislation bills that we passed talked about an opportunity that we can do this, especially in relation to the ability to cross-skill and to cross-train people from—that was specifically for, in that sense, really remote communities like the community of Menindee.

Dr AMANDA COHN: We supported that aspect of the legislation as well.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know, but that's what I'm saying—

Dr AMANDA COHN: But specifically what is the time line for Menindee?

Mr JIHAD DIB: For Menindee? I probably couldn't give you an exact time line to say, look, in March this year—I couldn't give you an exact time line. But the fact is that, now that we've got the legislation in, it enables us to do it. So we should be able to get going as soon as possible. I know the MP there, Mr Butler, is super keen as well. We've now got the ability to do it. Let's get going as soon as we can.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I also wanted to ask about the Hazards Near Me app.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Did you download it?

Dr AMANDA COHN: I've had it for a long time and I've also got to have the Victorian one because I live on a border, which is part of my question. But I've also received community feedback concerned about perhaps agencies being overly reliant on commercial social media platforms like Twitter—now X—Facebook et cetera, partly because they've been unstable but also that their algorithms are driven by profit. Could you tell us what work has already been done in terms of the Hazards Near Me app and can it be used to communicate critical information to residents on other issues, including heatwaves?

Mr JIHAD DIB: So heatwaves—I'm happy to have that conversation about heatwaves. Firstly, the Hazards Near Me app—a lot of work has gone into it. It's a really good app. I agree with you about the communication element. That's why it's so important to try to find different ways to be able to communicate, whether it's different push notifications—obviously, we've got the websites that we control ourselves as well. The work on heatwaves specifically, while it's not on the Hazards Near Me app, the heatwaves element on the—*not Get Ready*. There was one we launched—sorry, just give me a second. My brain has just stopped working for one

sec—basically what to do in an emergency. The website—it is. It's Get Ready. The website there talks about heatwaves.

There's a specific section—what to do, how to protect yourself, what are the mitigating factors that you can take. We're also very conscious that the Hazards Near Me app—we need to be careful that we don't overload so many different things that it becomes things are pinging for every little bit. But I'm really glad to see that heatwaves thing. It's one of the elements in terms of a natural disaster that people don't think about—the impact of heatwaves—in the same way that we think about something physical, like a fire or a flood. It's really important too in terms of the heatwaves stuff for us.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I know some work has gone on in the Hazards Near Me app recently. Has that addressed the cross-border operability issues?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I take that one on notice? I do know we've done some cross-border work not in the app but with the Queensland Government. But I'll take that on notice in terms of what we've done with cross-border issues with Victorians specifically the Hazards Near Me app.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'd really appreciate that update. From my point of view as an Albury resident, the fire nearest me is often in Victoria and I understand similar issues impact Tweed and Queensland as well.

Mr JIHAD DIB: The commissioner might actually have a response to that specifically.

ROB ROGERS: I do. Thanks, Minister. The app has been addressed to cover 50 kilometres either side of borders. So it should cover 50 kilometres now into Victoria as well as obviously Queensland as well. That's been in place now for—I think it's six months or so. Six months. So that was part of addressing that recommendation, which came from the bushfires inquiry. That recommended that we did something with border communities. There's also the Fires Near Me Australia app that's still out there that also covers all jurisdictions for fire anyway.

Mr JIHAD DIB: So there you go. So now you can drive from Echuca into Moama and keep going, or the other way around—50 kilometres.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I have a question about the 2020 royal commission into national natural disasters arrangements. That royal commission recommended an independent accountability and assurance governance mechanism for natural disaster arrangements. I understand that Victoria and Queensland have introduced Inspector-generals for Emergency Management. Is this something that you're considering for New South Wales?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We've got our emergency management system in the way that we've got it. We've got individuals there in different roles. My focus has got to be on making sure that I get our emergency services operations—I support them to do the great work that they do. We've got our emergency management committee. We've got SEOCON and I've got fantastic commissioners and leaders in each one of my emergency services.

Dr AMANDA COHN: To clarify, it's not your intention to introduce an inspector-type role?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's not something that I'm thinking about at the moment.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I have a question about hazard reduction burning. I understand that weather conditions this winter made that difficult and that the RFS carried out fewer than they intended to. I'm interested in the factors that go into the decision on whether or not or when to do a burn, particularly with regard to the PM2.5 air pollution and the smoke from burns impacting residents. Is that taken into account and, if so, how?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I could say a little bit and then maybe I'll invite the commissioner. But I've also met with people from Asthma Australia talking about some of those concerns as well. I'm really happy to see that the RFS does notify. But, to answer some of those real specific details instead of—the particles that you were talking about. I might ask the commissioner. Thank you very much for saying that it has been difficult to be able to do the hazard reduction over the past couple of years. Any opportunity the RFS gets, we've been taking—also working with other agencies as well. There has been a challenge. Commissioner Rogers might also be able to give you some real specific stuff. But we do publish the information about air quality on the New South Wales air quality website. It's good to do it on a website. We're also looking at how do we make sure we get that communication out in other measures as well because not everyone's going to always just go to a website. So who are the different people we can send that information to? But I might hand over to the commissioner if that's all right.

ROB ROGERS: Thanks, Minister. You're correct, smoke is a significant issue. When we have multiple hazard reductions that we're doing, we tend to model the smoke, what we think the smoke will do. Where we think that there's going to be a significant impact on community health, we'll seek to adjust what we call lighting patterns, as in, what time we do, what order we do them. Then we try to model it again to try to reduce that level

of impact. That's not always able to be completed. Sydney is a perfect example of a problem we have with that. It's why they call it the Sydney Basin. It just traps the smoke in there. It sits in there overnight. Then an inversion layer comes in and holds that smoke until the wind comes up, which sometimes in Sydney can sit there until late morning. That's where we really get that problem. So we model it. Where we think there's going to be a problem—there's a multi-department steering committee, including Health, EPA. We talk to them about what we're seeing on the modelling. We get specific health advice if we think we need to—if there are things that we're not aware of, Health gets a seat at the table and then we make sure we talk to them before we do anything that will have that significant impact.

I guess an example was, when people were running the Sydney Marathon, we adjusted when we were doing burns to make sure that that—because we're having all these people doing quite a lot of exercise and we tried to minimise the impact on the people doing that. That's where we've shown how we'll modify them. Hazard reductions are very much done to what's called a prescription. That will also depend on what you're trying to achieve out of the burn. Are you trying to reduce the fuel on the ground or your elevated fuels? Is it an environmental burn to try to help the plan from an environmental point of view? And then we'll try to stick to that prescription, so that says ideal winds and temperature and the like—if that answered your question.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes, I'll come back to it this afternoon.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, earlier in the hearing you said you had an expression of interest process for your local small allocations grants. Very briefly, what did that look like and was it consistent across the State?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We'd reach out to community groups and say, "Hey, there's an application process." People ran in different ways.

The Hon. WES FANG: What was the application process?

Mr JIHAD DIB: What I'm—people to put up a nomination, so basically put up a submission.

The Hon. WES FANG: How did you advertise that this grant was available?

Mr JIHAD DIB: We shared it with community groups.

The Hon. WES FANG: Was it consistent statewide? Was there advice from head office as to how you were to advertise it?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I did it through my office then—my local office did it.

The Hon. WES FANG: So you weren't told by head office to do it in any certain particular way?

Mr JIHAD DIB: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: So there was no consistency in the way that candidates would do that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm not sure what other candidates did.

The Hon. WES FANG: Who did you actually advise as to who you'd nominated for the grants?

Mr JIHAD DIB: There was a process that we'd put up nominations and people were just checking that. That would be something that the party at the time would have had a look at.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you announce the commitments in your electorate?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I don't know if I did. With some of them, we knew that we were able to support and I was able to tell them. I just thought it was a very good opportunity to be able to support local community. I've rattled off the different organisations that we've supported—

The Hon. WES FANG: No, Minister, it's not about—

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've mentioned the organisations that we supported and the great benefit that they would have received.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, and I think they were very worthy. I'm more trying to understand the process because it's been less than clear from other members of your party as to how this grants process worked. Certainly it seems to be quite opaque. How were people supposed to—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I also add that they—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm asking the questions, Minister. I've only got a minute left.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I know, but that process also meant—

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, I've only got a minute left.

Mr JIHAD DIB: —that every single electorate would be able to be the recipient of that—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm going to redirect now, please.

Mr JIHAD DIB: —regardless of who their MP was.

The Hon. WES FANG: If you want to talk about it that way, the seats of Murray and Barwon, which have so many LGAs—you did it on electorates, not LGAs, the way we do it. We did it on LGAs; you want to do it on electorates, so the people of Murray and Barwon missed out. But anyway—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Remember the bushfire one? Some 97 per cent of funding went to your electorates.

The Hon. WES FANG: —I'll keep moving on. How do you expect people to know the grant—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order—

The Hon. WES FANG: —was open if you didn't advertise it?

The CHAIR: Order! A point of order has been taken.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Do you remember the bushfire grant?

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister—

The CHAIR: Order! A point of order has been taken.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Madam Chair, budget estimates is not a forum for the Opposition to articulate what it thinks is its policy or what should be its policy, or what the effects of the Government's policy were. It's a forum for Ministers to answer questions. I ask that the member ask an actual question.

The CHAIR: There is only 20 seconds left. If the member has a direct question, I suggest he asks it.

The Hon. WES FANG: Minister, how did you expect other community groups in your electorate to know that this was an open grants process if you didn't tell them or advertise it? You just kept it to the select ones that you wanted.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Have you made your point?

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I'm asking a question. How was it open and fair? You can answer the question. You're allowed to answer the question.

The CHAIR: Does the Minister want to provide an answer to that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Mr Fang, I've made it pretty clear that we've undertaken a good process. I've detailed—

The Hon. WES FANG: So you say.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I've detailed the organisations that were recipients of that really important funding to—

The Hon. WES FANG: And I'm sure there are a lot of community groups—

Mr JIHAD DIB: Sorry, you've asked me the question and I'm going to give you the answer. You may not like the answer, but I actually want to give you the answer because it's my opportunity to actually be able to answer your question. The funding that was provided as a result of this commitment is supporting young people with mental health issues, refugee women, the Older Women's Network and playgrounds for young people. I think those things are very worthy causes. The process that we undertook made sure that there was an application and it is a benefit to the community. Had I not won that seat, it didn't matter: That commitment was still going to be made either way. Unlike previous governments' commitments that were designed only to support some, this was about making sure that every community group had access to it.

The Hon. WES FANG: That wasn't the question, Minister. The question was—

The CHAIR: Dr Amanda Cohn has the call.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'll use my last three minutes to come back to the health impacts of wood smoke. I appreciate the commissioner's earlier response. Minister, you touched on the importance of public information and education on this issue. Particularly, people with respiratory conditions and people who are pregnant should actually be wearing N95 masks to protect from the risks of wood smoke. What work has your office undertaken as part of that public education or public information piece?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Dr Cohn, any information that I hear, I sometimes use my office and my opportunities even through some of the networks that I may have to pass on information that's really important to people. We spoke a little bit earlier about how to best communicate any of that information. We've also been doing some work around the multicultural space to ensure that we can engage with communities who may hear the message in a different way, or maybe the message is not understood in the same way that it's intended.

The purpose is to try and get the information out as soon as possible—and to as many people as possible—where I get a little bit of crossover, even with the Department of Customer Service, where obviously I can use some of the channels that we have there to relay a safety message to community. The educative piece is really important and we're doing some work. There's obviously more work that we can and will do. But we also want people to understand that there is a health risk factor here, and what you can do to protect yourself. That's where the educative piece comes in. I'm more than happy to continue working on that with any agency and anybody.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You mentioned the broad communication channels available to you with your role with Customer Service. Have you used those for public health messaging around fires and wood smoke?

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm not sure that I can answer the one about wood smoke in particular. I think about a month and a half ago when we had the wood smoke stuck in the basin for a little, we got the messaging out as much as we could. I know the commissioner, myself and others tried to get through any media access that we could to say to people, "Take care, cover up, close your windows where you can." That's where we used all of our information. What we really want to do is try to get more people onto our website. For example, the Get Ready website has all of the info—and part of the educative piece, also—saying to people, "Hey, there's this great app called Hazards Near Me but there's this other great app called the Get Ready website that we need you to get into whenever you can because it will help you." That was recently launched and it's an important one.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I wrote to your office on 14 August asking that you use this type of communication channel for preparation for heatwave emergencies, particularly noting that many people don't have air conditioning at home or means to stay cool. Have you used those communication methods for heatwaves?

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's on our Get Ready website that I've talked about, the information for the heatwaves. We'll continue pushing different information that we can. It's on the website.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Have you used any channel other than the Get Ready website?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Can I get back to you on that one?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Please do.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Off the top of my head, I can't tell you. I know it's on the Get Ready website, which addresses those issues. I appreciate the reach-out as well.

The CHAIR: Does the Government have any questions?

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: No, we don't.

Mr JIHAD DIB: I'm happy to—are you asking me whether there's anything I'd like to add?

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Oh, funny you should ask!

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Minister, would you like us to hand back to Wes?

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got plenty for you!

The CHAIR: Order! The Government has the floor.

Mr JIHAD DIB: He's going to get three new likes on his Instagram now.

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: Minister, this is an opportunity to clarify anything raised in this morning's proceedings.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Yes, I'm going to clarify some things that I've had to come back to on notice, and also anything I was unsure of. Would that be okay?

The CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Then I can have the rest of the time?

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Shame!

Mr JIHAD DIB: I advise that, regarding Fire and Rescue's employee-related expenses, the budget is \$774 million. This is a nearly \$100 million increase in the budget and an \$8 million increase on 2022-23 expenditure. Overtime—

The Hon. WES FANG: Increase or decrease? It's a decrease in expenditure.

Mr JIHAD DIB: It's like being with the naughty kid. Just give me a sec, I will answer the question. Overtime is allowed for in clause 24 of the award but there is no guarantee to overtime for an individual firefighter in the award.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did the unions agree to that?

Mr JIHAD DIB: Youth Justice continue to support young people in our Youth Justice Centres to access digital devices, programs and skills development in this area. There are a number of projects underway to pilot digital solutions for young people involved in Youth Justice. The full implementation plan for emergency management recommendations in relation to Menindee is going to the State Emergency Management Committee in December; that's the answer for you, Dr Cohn.

Before I finish up, I just want to add a little bit more and then I will ask Commissioner Rogers to clarify the fuel card issue. In the break I met a young man some of you may know—I am not going to name him, but some of you may know him. Ms MacDonald and I were having a chat with him; he is known to both of us through our roles as youth justice Minister and shadow. This is a young kid—maybe this will leave members with a little bit of inspiration regarding some of the work we do, particularly in Youth Justice. There's an effort to change people's lives, to actually make them better and to make sure they never come back. We love the kids but we don't want them back there again. That's always the motto.

With the "Try a Trade" day, for example, we were bringing in people to teach young people some skills so that it might be the motivator for them, when they leave, to actually get into some work. We make sure we support them all the way through, teaching them different skills. One of the great stories was that there was a young person who, as a result of the Try a Trade day course, got, I think, a plumbing apprenticeship upon his release. That was a fantastic story. The young man that Ms MacDonald, Ms Suvaal and I spoke to is a young kid who, if we didn't believe in positivity—he was in a youth detention centre. That young kid actually ended up getting, as a result of some of the work that happened in there, a scholarship and he's now at university. He's actually changing his life and he wants to do youth leadership and youth mentoring.

Those are the things that we believe in. It's about what we can do for people. In the same way when we talk about customer service and what we do, it's about the people, especially the people who miss out. It's about protecting those who maybe don't have a champion. It's about looking after those who maybe don't have a voice and it's about giving them opportunities. That is one example of something that happens. As I said to you, I would love to be able to come back and say, "You know what, we've got no kids. We don't want to see them." But we're going to build stuff around them. I think that's a really, really important one.

I just want to take this last opportunity before I hand over to the commissioner as well—I don't know if this is a done thing or not, and I know they are all tuning in and watching, so I'm straight at the camera. I just want to thank all of the teams that have worked so hard in helping me in this role and helping me prepare for today. I really do appreciate it. I hope I was able to answer the questions as best as I could for the Committee. But there's a whole team thing that happens in running government and we'll continue doing the very best that we can. When we keep people at the centre of it, then I know that we've actually got the best chance of making the best society that we can. Just on that, if I can pass over to Commissioner Rogers, who might have something on the fuel card.

ROB ROGERS: Yes. We've identified that issue, which happened in the Coffs Harbour area and it was a council issue. There was a spare card made available and there was also a message to say that it won't affect strike teams leaving to help other parts of the State. There was an Ampol card that was provided to do that. But the issue is rectified one day after. Just on the community consultation question, when we have serious fires, I appoint an incident controller under the Rural Fires Act. Part of the letter of appointment states that they must hold a community meeting within 21 days of the revoking of that fire emergency, and part of it is to explain the fire strategies but also hear back community feedback and to make sure that they provide then a report to me after that, and that report is to contain any community concerns that have been raised.

Mr JIHAD DIB: Thank you, Commissioner. Again thanks to my commissioner's senior leadership team for the work they do. We are going into some pretty difficult days, particularly with the bushfire season. We've got, as I said, 85 fires at the moment. The other thing I acknowledge is that, when it comes to things like that, I work with shadow Minister Singh in making sure we can do whatever we can when it comes to a natural disaster. It's not about the politics, it's actually about how we can support community. Thanks for today, for my first ever experience of budget estimates on this side of it.

The CHAIR: Does the Government have any further questions?

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: No.

The CHAIR: In that case, that does conclude our time with the Minister this morning. It also concludes our time with Commissioner Rogers. Thank you for your time this morning. We'll break for lunch and be back at 2.00 p.m.

(The Minister withdrew.)

(Rob Rogers withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

The CHAIR: Welcome back to the afternoon session. I will throw now straight to the Opposition for questioning.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: My question is for Mr Draper. Good to see you again. Let's start with the flood study question that I posed to the Minister in the earlier session around the Reconstruction Authority, or the New South Wales Government, obviously supporting Cabonne shire council with the funding and resources required to get new and updated flood studies down for Eugowra and Canowindra.

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, there is money available under the Floodplain Management Program. I understand council has applied for money under that program and those applications are under consideration. So there's a standing arrangement. The other thing I'd say is that I mentioned earlier in the hearing in answer to a question from Ms Cohn that we're also looking at doing disaster adaptation plans for many places, and the Central West is one of those areas we're prioritising disaster adaptation plans.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Is there a time line on the consideration? How long have the applications been closed for, for the funding for the flood study?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't know that. I can try to find out during the course of this hearing and let you know.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes.

SIMON DRAPER: All of that work that's going to happen through the Central West is being given priority by the Reconstruction Authority. We're treating the Central West as one of those areas, like a few other parts of the State, that are of the highest importance in terms of getting that disaster adaptation work done, including flood studies that inform that.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Going back to the media release that's been tabled with the Committee that the Premier, Minister Scully and Minister Dib put out yesterday or last night—this may be a bit of a mop-up job for the Minister, I'm not quite sure. It specifically talks about house raising and retrofits. I asked the Minister this morning about buybacks or rebuilds. What is your understanding? Are buybacks and rebuilds included in this \$50 million announcement?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, it's worth saying that the short answer is that I think anything will be considered. We've learnt a lot of lessons from the Northern Rivers. One of those lessons is that you don't rush in and make decisions about big buyback programs without talking to local stakeholders and community leaders, in particular councils. That's probably the biggest lesson. We're going to be doing that. That's one of the undertakings that we've given. I've spoken directly with those councils out in that area—the mayors and general managers—about that.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: As long as it's not ruled ineligible, you would consider it?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes. We'll be talking to them. I know that there is interest in all of those remedies but probably at a much more modest scale in the Central West than we've applied in the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: The majority of people want to stay in the community, so retrofitting and house raising is actually, I would suspect, the majority of claims or the majority of support needed. But there were 27 homes that were demolished, destroyed. I suppose it's those people who are impacted, those 27, that's where the conversation needs to be. Is that what you're saying?

SIMON DRAPER: There's two reasons why we have bought back homes, using the Northern Rivers as the case study. One was where the homes were destroyed or so severely damaged that they couldn't possibly be saved. The other is more focused on future risk to those homes. It's to do with removing homes from places that

are particularly high risk in flood scenarios. I think you were referring to Eugowra earlier; there are a number of homes there that have been destroyed. They may be able to be rebuilt on those properties. I know we put a lot of pods on those properties. People wanted to stay where they lived. In a lot of cases they are rebuilding either because they've got insurance money to do that or they may be eligible for the DRG structural grants. Buybacks may be considered under those circumstances, but that's not our primary purpose. Our primary purpose is really to remove households from places that are a higher risk from future floods.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: You may need to take it on notice, or you may know off the top of your head, but I want to confirm when we talk Central West—we're talking about Eugowra, Manildra, Cumnock, Molong, Canowindra, Forbes? Is Parkes eligible? Wellington?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, there's four LGAs that we're talking about. It is Cabonne, Forbes, Parkes and Lachlan.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Excellent. Another question is regarding this media release, and in the second page it talks about community projects such as the rebuild of Eugowra's preschool with Cabonne shire council. Within the Reconstruction Authority, you'd be familiar that there is approval for a temporary set-up of Eugowra's preschool, which is a community-led model. It is the Eugowra community childcare centre. This morning what I was asking the Minister to confirm was the \$6½ million ask that is coming from the Cabonne shire to support that community organisation to completely rebuild and stand up a new facility. Was the Minister correct to say, as he did this morning, that it would be rebuilt for that \$6½ million ask?

SIMON DRAPER: I think you probably know this already, but there has already been a rebuild. Schools Infrastructure and the Reconstruction Authority, through the council, have funded the reestablishment of that centre. It hasn't been opened yet; that's really a question for council. But it's been rebuilt down at the showground site there.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes, but it's very much a temporary set-up though. The number one community asset—whether you ask council, flood advisory groups, local businesspeople or people on the streets in Eugowra is that they want a new childcare centre built from the ground up. That is the number one community asset. They'd like to know if that's going to happen or not, or is that at the top of the Reconstruction Authority's priority list for Eugowra?

SIMON DRAPER: I will say it has been pretty much rebuilt from the ground up. The one that's there now is pretty much a completely new—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: They're temporary buildings though.

SIMON DRAPER: They're temporary buildings, but it's a new centre. The question of whether the council would like to build another centre in the future at another spot or in the same place, that's really a matter for them. We have only just finished the temporary version.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: But it's not council, Mr Draper. Council is assisting this community organisation, as you'd know, which is a private organisation, community owned and operated. Council are supporting because of the rigmarole they had to go through with the Department of Education. I've been through this process with them ever since the flood occurred. There is a real need. If you survey that community, the number one community asset they want invested in is a new community childcare centre.

SIMON DRAPER: Just to go back to the more general nature of your question. The money that the Government has set aside—they announced that initially in the State budget back on I think it was 19 September and then there was a media release today which just confirmed that further. So there's a number of potential uses for that money. One is housing programs, which we've just been talking about. Another is community assets, and again we will be asking the councils which ones. A number of councils have different community assets that they would prioritise. There's the disaster adaptation planning I mentioned a moment ago. Some of that work needs to be done by councils themselves, so we'd be setting aside some money for that. The other use, which I think is going to be important and I know that you've had an interest in this in the past too, is that road and bridge betterment.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's my next question.

SIMON DRAPER: Some of that money will be available. There are roads and bridges which get washed out; we rebuild them. They get washed out; we rebuild them again. There will be roads and bridges in those areas. Each of those councils will have particular priorities—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I've got some specific questions for you. Just going back to the preschool, I was in Eugowra only two weeks ago. The new facility at the showground was still not functioning. I'm not asking

you to get involved in that. That's something between council and the organisation and whatnot. But that is a temporary facility. I think your comment earlier was that you have rebuilt it. Well, you've rebuilt a temporary facility. My question is, in the long term, has the Reconstruction Authority got at the top of their priority list for that community a brand-new facility?

SIMON DRAPER: Our priority list is going to be determined by discussions with council and community. That's what you'd expect. That again was a very important lesson to learn from the Northern Rivers—you've got to be guided by the community. You've got to be guided by the councils. We intend to make sure we use that lesson in the Central West.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I just think it's worth noting that in—and this is publicly available information—the *Building Back Better Cabonne* urgent priorities document, their own submissions all have that childcare facility at the top of their list. Now I'm going to move on Mr Draper. You will remember our visit—in a former life, before the election—where we went out to Molong rail bridge. Is there an update on this? In my discussions with Cabonne Council, they have it estimated at maybe \$10 million, looking at the span. But it certainly is something that could go a long way in flood mitigation into the future for Molong and removing those issues around flash flooding. Where are we up to with that project?

SIMON DRAPER: For the benefit of the other members of the community, when Mr Farraway refers to "former life", it's his former life as a Minister.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Yes, my former life.

SIMON DRAPER: We visited Molong with the council. The issue with the rail bridge there is that, as the water comes around the bend, it can get clogged up under the rail bridge and cause a lot of back-flooding, so it's a real problem for the Molong township. I understand that Transport hasn't yet resolved that, but they're still looking at it. I think that's one of those projects that would come out of the disaster adaptation planning, so we would prioritise it, depending what comes out of that planning process.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: So Transport hasn't completed an estimated cost, engineering options or anything yet?

SIMON DRAPER: Not as far as I'm aware. I can try to get some more information during the session, if you like, but I'm not aware that they have got a solution yet. But I would say, again, I think all of those sorts of things should be the product of some very methodical planning with the council and the community there to determine if that is the top priority. Certainly, when we have met with council, they are still concerned about Molong bridge, so I think it's going to be up there as one of those projects that has to be considered.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Continuing on that theme of projects, the Nyrang Creek bridge, which is the one between Canowindra and Eugowra, it's one of the top infrastructure projects for that region post flooding. It probably needs a portion of money—betterment money is the best way to describe it. Nyrang Creek bridge, where does it sit in the priorities list? What work are we doing with Transport for NSW? Do we have access to betterment funding to fix that crossing properly?

SIMON DRAPER: The money that we're talking about, the \$50 million, I note in the media release—I haven't actually got a physical copy, but I've got it on my phone here—it refers to also wanting to work with the Federal Government. You would be aware that what we would call category D programs are designed for betterment. The way that works is when you've got a bridge, a road or an asset that's damaged like that, where you have more money available, you can rebuild that road, that bridge or that asset to a higher standard or augment it in a way that it's not as vulnerable to future natural hazards. That's part of the purpose of this program. When we went out—and I have been out a few times—and met with the councils out there, that sort of road betterment and bridge betterment is definitely one of those top priorities, and that will be included as part of the funding.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We've got \$50 million announced by the State Government. What discussions has the Reconstruction Authority had with Commonwealth counterparts and agencies about matching it, about what is needed? Where are we up to in those discussions? Has a formal request and submission been sent to the Commonwealth?

SIMON DRAPER: We are certainly talking to NEMA, which is the national body. In fact, when I went and met with the councils and spent a few days with them—that was Cabonne, Parkes and Forbes; I didn't get to Lachlan on that trip. I did that trip with the chief executive of NEMA, so we went to exactly the same meetings, hearing the same things, getting the same feedback, and he and I have been in constant contact over that period to try to work together to come up with a joint solution, which is the normal arrangement for disaster recovery.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Across those four local government areas that you mentioned before as part of this Central West package, we've got \$50 million on the table. In your opinion—well, in your experience

and in your judgement, how much is needed in the work that the Reconstruction Authority has done in order to retrofit, raise, build back, buy back and also the community assets package? How much is needed across those four LGAs to rebuild it completely?

SIMON DRAPER: My experience is that the demand is endless. Particularly with roads and things like that, you can keep going because we've got a lot of rebuilding and adaptation to do in New South Wales for future hazards. In terms of the priorities that we understood from councils, I think an amount of between \$50 million and \$100 million will actually suffice for what we've been asked for. The community assets, often they don't require very large sums of money in their own right. Some of them are quite modest on an asset-by-asset basis. Probably the bigger elements are the roads packages. That would be probably the biggest element, I think.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Going to the Resilient Homes Program, that \$700 million in tranche two, you may need to take this on notice, but how many applications were received for a buyback both in the Northern Rivers and in the Central West?

SIMON DRAPER: Are we talking Northern Rivers now?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Both. I want to know across that program how many applications have been received for either a build-back or buyback.

SIMON DRAPER: Up until this announcement, there is no program for buybacks in the Central West other than the one that has been going around for a long time, the voluntary home purchase scheme, which is a very slow-moving scheme; you may be aware it's jointly funded with councils. In the Northern Rivers, there are over 7,000 people who have registered for the Resilient Homes Program, and that has been growing even during the course of this year. Not all of those people, I think, would be expecting to get a buyback. There are retrofits and raisings in there as well.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When you say 7,000, for instance, can you dissect how many applications have been received—let's just say Northern Rivers, because obviously until the announcement last night, there hasn't been the ability to put an application in for the Central West. But in the Northern Rivers, how many applications have been received for a retrofit? Or are you saying that the 7,000 was the collective total of applications submitted?

SIMON DRAPER: When people register for Resilient Homes in the Northern Rivers, they don't register for one of those treatments. They register generally. And then we have—

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Does the Reconstruction Authority then deem whether it is a house raise, retrofit, build-back or buyback, or is that a discussion with the applicant?

SIMON DRAPER: The way it works is that we—what we've done, actually, is identify homes that are a top priority for buyback, because those homes are in very high-risk zones. There have been about 1,100 homes that initially have been prioritised for that. There are about another 400 homes that have been identified for a raising or a retrofit within the \$700 million that we have.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Can you just run those numbers again?

SIMON DRAPER: About 1,100 homes were identified—well, prioritised for the first round of home buybacks, and we're working through those. About 400 homes that were identified to date for raisings or retrofits—it requires a lot of information to figure out whether a raising or a retrofit applies, because you've got to know a whole lot of information.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: And these are predominantly in the Northern Rivers?

SIMON DRAPER: Sorry, this is all Northern Rivers. There is no such program in the Central West.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: That's fine. You have answered those few questions. Of the \$700 million, how much has actually been spent to date?

SIMON DRAPER: I will probably start with what we've done in terms of offers, because—I will get that in a moment. I've got Mr Conrow here, who is our chief financial and operating officer, who may have some more information on that, or Mr Hendicott, who is from the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation. Out of the 1,100 homes that we have prioritised, there have been 649 offers made; 393 of those have been accepted by the home owner. So we're about 60 per cent of the way through the offers process.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: When will the rest of the tranche one money be spent? When do you think you will expend all of that \$700 million?

SIMON DRAPER: There is going to have to be a point at which we assess how much of it is going to be consumed, because we have worked out how many offers we can make within that budget. It's actually one of the biggest buyback programs, I think, Australia has ever seen. There is a similar one happening in Queensland; they're at about a similar point, actually, as us. But it may be that the rate of acceptance will determine how much money is left in the fund. And then there is the other money that the Government has recently announced as well: another \$100 million for the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Would you be able to take on notice, Mr Draper, breaking down the applications by LGA for the Committee?

SIMON DRAPER: We may not have to take it on notice. We may be able to get that for you during the course of the session.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: Obviously, if we talk all Northern Rivers—you've got your 7,000. Then it's broken up—1,100 buyback, 400 raising or retrofit, then 649 to 393. If we can just have that broken up, I suppose, per LGA?

SIMON DRAPER: Do you mean the offers that have been made or do you mean the 7,000 registrations?

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: We would probably want it from the 7,000 down, so in terms of where across those LGAs those 7,000 applications come from. But then if we can drill down, obviously, into the 1,100 and then the 400, I think that would be important, but by LGA across the Northern Rivers.

SIMON DRAPER: I can certainly tell you that in terms of the buybacks that have been prioritised to date, the vast majority of those are in the Lismore City Council LGA. I will use a round figure so as not to get it wrong, but I would say about 750 of the buyback offers are in the Lismore City Council. I'll just look to Mr Hendicott and check that.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I've asked for a bit of detailed information, so I'm happy for you to take it on notice if you need to.

SIMON DRAPER: I will try to get it now, but if I can't get it you to in the course of the session we will come back to you.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: There was a five-year time line, wasn't there, put on that buyback program to complete? Is that fair to say?

SIMON DRAPER: No.

The Hon. SAM FARRAWAY: I just remember that at some stage the Northern Rivers was advised by people in those 7,000 applications that it could be a five-year program to deliver a buyback or program of that scale.

SIMON DRAPER: I'm not aware of that time frame. Certainly, there are many years of recovery to go in the Northern Rivers, particularly in the public infrastructure rebuilding process and creating new homes and those sorts of things. But in terms of the buyback program itself, I'm not aware of such a time limit.

The CHAIR: I just wanted to go, first of all, to Mr Tidball. We were talking earlier about the segregation of children in Youth Justice Centres, and you said you had some extra information around that.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes, certainly. If I can just make the point that only 6.6 per cent of segregation events in the period reported were for more than 24 hours. If I can also indicate, in terms of the trending, I've just got to hand, since your question this morning, the 2023 segregation data, which for more than 24 hours was 113 events, which is the lowest in six years. Probably also by way of context, the Children (Detention Centres) Act provides for separation, segregation and confinement. The critical point about section 19 that deals with segregation is that it is exclusively for the purpose of managing risk. We, characteristically, are talking about potential for violence and extreme violence to other young people in detention, and that's the exclusive purpose. I should also indicate that the trigger point—the significance of the 24-hour threshold is that is the threshold at which it needs to be reported to the Ombudsman, which of course it is.

The CHAIR: Is there any provision for a psychologist in New South Wales in those instances as well?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes, absolutely.

The CHAIR: There is?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I have experts with me who can speak to that. We have some 42 psychologists working in Youth Justice, and the priority access is absolutely where we have separation, segregation or confinement, pursuant to the Children (Detention Centres) Act taking place. They have priority access.

The CHAIR: Are they given an hour with a psychologist the moment that they're given segregation or is it just that they have access? I just wanted to confirm how it works in practice.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may, Chair, defer to my colleague, Ms Czech.

SIMONE CZECH: Each child or young person in detention obviously is an individual, and there's a plan around each of those children.³ That plan's called a Detainee Risk Management Plan. We have just recently completed a review of the policy associated with those plans to have much more of a focus on how we support young people, particularly where it includes segregation as part of that plan. As a result, we now call that a behaviour assessment pathway—assistant, sorry—which really details the supports that that child or young person will have during their time in detention.⁴ That will include access to psychologists. As Michael said, we've got psychologists throughout all of our six detention centres. It's not proscriptive in that it's an hour a week; it will depend on the unique needs of that particular young person. So it could be more than an hour, but it will depend on those individual circumstances.

The CHAIR: Mr Tidball, you mentioned the new financial year statistics for 2023. Are they available? Can we get a copy? Is it possible to table that one?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Absolutely, yes, of course. They are collected by us. As I say, they are referred to the Ombudsman, but we have those and we can certainly provide those on notice. But the headline figure for 2022-23 as I said, was 113.

The CHAIR: What is that as a reduction compared with the previous year?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: It was 119, from memory, in 2021-22 and 113 in 2022-23.

The CHAIR: That, specifically, is segregation lasting more than 24 hours?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: For 24 hours plus, yes.

SIMONE CZECH: If I may, could I just add to the secretary's response on those numbers? As Mr Tidball described, we have had a significant reduction over the last six years. So 113 this year; 2021-22, 145; 2020-21, 119; 2019-20, 134; 2018-19, 152; and 2017-18, 142. We can provide those on notice, if that is helpful.

The CHAIR: Is that all segregation or is that—

SIMONE CZECH: No, that's the more than 24 hours.

The CHAIR: I was going to ask one more question.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may, Chair.

The CHAIR: Yes, go ahead.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I just indicate that the aim with segregation is, pursuant to the statute, exclusively for the purpose of managing risk. A segregation event can pass within 20 minutes. The aim is to de-escalate as soon and quickly as we're able. That is generally what happens.

The CHAIR: Yes, that is why I was trying to clarify the difference between over 24 hours versus something that is quite a short period of time of segregation.

SIMONE CZECH: We do have the overall numbers for segregation, if that helps?

The CHAIR: Yes, that would be useful too, thanks.

SIMONE CZECH: Again, we've got them over the last five years: So 2022-23, 1,231; 2021-22, 2,216; 2020-21, 2,836; 2019-20, 4,809; and 2018-19, 6,660. So it's over that period of time an 82 per cent reduction in the total number of segregations.

³ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Ms Simon Czech, Deputy Secretary, Child Protection, Permanency, District and Youth Justice Services, Department of Communities and Justice, clarified the evidence given.

⁴ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Ms Simon Czech, Deputy Secretary, Child Protection, Permanency, District and Youth Justice Services, Department of Communities and Justice, clarified the evidence given.

The CHAIR: How have we been able to reduce those segregations? What has been implemented and what's going to continue to help us get those numbers down—particularly for over 24 hours because they are obviously far more serious than a 20-minute segregation?

SIMONE CZECH: I'm happy to respond.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Have a go.

SIMONE CZECH: First of all, segregation, as Mr Tidball said, is an important risk management strategy, both for other detainees but also our staff. So it is an important tool, but not one we want to use, clearly, a lot. But it is an important tool, and it is important to make that point. Over the past four to five years, Youth Justice has undertaken a significant program of reform that has focused on safety improvements—so infrastructure improvements to our detention centres. Every detention centre has benefited from those infrastructure or safety improvements. We've also invested a lot of money in staff training and our leadership as well to make sure that staff have got the tools and expertise and capability to respond to young people in a trauma-informed way.

I think it was mentioned this morning—I'm not sure if it was the secretary or Minister Dib—that the majority of these young people come into detention with significant histories of trauma and abuse, and that often manifests itself in their behaviour. So it's important that our staff are well equipped, and we invest in them, like I said, to actually make sure that they can support those young people adequately. There are a series of other programs, and I might ask Ms Neilson to expand on some of those as well.

CANDICE NEILSON: I'd be happy to. Thanks, Simone. The other things that I'd like to point out in terms of system reforms that we've undertaken over the past five years, some of which are a direct response to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse—we have introduced X-ray body scanners, which have almost completely eliminated the need for young people to be subjected to partially-clothed body searches. Prior to the X-ray scanners, which some of you would be familiar with if you've been through an airport recently, young people would undertake a partially clothed body search, which would mean that they'd remove the top part of their clothing and would be searched, and then they would put that back on, and then the bottom part of their clothing and then put that back on. We would have one staff member observing the young person and we would have another staff member observing that staff member. As you can understand, for young people with a significant history of trauma, abuse and neglect, that process was even further traumatising, so we are really pleased with the introduction of our body scanners across our entire custodial network, to have almost eliminated the need for young people to be subjected to that process.

Just last week I was out at our Cobham Youth Justice Centre and I was asking the staff there about how much that has reduced the need for kids to submit to the partially clothed body search. The acting centre manager told me that, to his knowledge, there had only been one person who had said that they didn't want to go in the body scanner and would rather have the search. As it turned out, that young person had contraband on his person. So you could say that's been a significant success story. It's good for young people but also good for our staff, who certainly didn't enjoy having to perform that procedure.

The other thing we've done is roll out body-worn cameras. Our incident response team now have body-worn cameras that they can activate when they are responding to an emergency situation. We have instituted a use of force review panel. Every time young people are subjected to the use of force, any CCTV footage or body one camera footage that is recorded during that use of force is referred to the use of force panel so that they can review that process and make sure it's all been done in accordance with legislation, policy and procedure. If we find instances where there might have been slight mistakes made, we can correct through education and further training—that kind of thing.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I will come back to emergency services, so my question is to the commissioners. I understand that across New South Wales and across Australia we're seeing a decline in formal volunteerism, for a whole range of demographic reasons and cost of living et cetera. I'm interested in the work that your agencies are doing to address this. For Fire and Rescue, I understand that is also impacting the ability to recruit and retain firefighters.

JEREMY FEWTRELL: For Fire and Rescue, almost half of our workforce are retained on-call firefighters. We also have 4,500 community firefighting volunteers. So we've got a pure volunteer model and the part-time one. We do see ebbs and flows and, more than ever, it is important that we maintain Fire and Rescue as an engaging and attractive opportunity for people to contribute their time. It is very much a discretionary activity for our retained firefighters in particular, because they're performing that work in addition to their primary employment, to family commitments and to any other work. We've got a sustainable on-call program—it's one of our strategic priorities—to identify a number of things that we can do within the organisation to make sure that model is as sustainable as possible and remains attractive to them. We're also targeting a lot of local recruitment.

We've appointed recruitment officers in the commands and also recruitment coordinators at an area level. They're people with good local knowledge and contacts, who are able to identify potential candidates and also help them through the recruitment process. Those positions have been in place for a few months now, so they're just starting to really make some good progress.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Could you give us some more information about the sustainable on-call? What does that involve?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We're looking at a range of different things we can do within the system, whether that's any changes that need to be considered in relation to the retained award or whether it's anything to do with the systems that they utilise to provide access to the organisation in terms of saying when they're available and when they're not available. It's been very much led by our retained firefighters, and they've had a lot of contribution. One of the highlights of that has been a station leadership and development program. We've trained several hundred retained firefighters in that program already over the past 12 months, and those programs are continuing this year. That's to build leadership capability because we know, for any sort of volunteer or part-time work like this, the impact that good leadership can have on the attraction and retention of retained firefighters. So investing in that leadership capability is going to pay dividends for us.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Do you know how many vacancies there are at the moment across New South Wales in those retained positions and volunteer positions?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Yes. I've got the figures here. We have close to 500 vacancies across our retained network.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Does that data exist for the volunteer positions?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No. There's no establishment for the volunteer positions. The number I gave you was for our retained firefighters. They are part-time on-call firefighters. The volunteers that are based in the community fire unit are street-based units. They've got a minimum level that they need to have a viable number, but there's no establishment figure that we could say that we've got X number of vacancies against for that.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm pleased to hear that there's work that's only just started to address this, so I look forward to following that up next year to hear how it's going. I've got the same question for Commissioner York for the SES.

CARLENE YORK: Encouragingly, the NSW State Emergency Service is not seeing a reduction in volunteers. In fact, we've increased up to over 10,500 volunteers. Since February 2022 we've received over 7,000 applications to join the NSW SES and we're progressing through those applications. We've still got around 1,600 applications to go, so it's quite an effort by the organisation to get through those applications. Obviously, that's overall figures. Some of the communities in smaller, remote towns see reductions in volunteers due to the nature of the towns reducing, the mines closing or some other effect. Obviously, in a lot of cases in those areas we are moving volunteers around the State as we need them.

There's been a significant enhancement in relation to our number of permanent staff as well. That has assisted us—I think the Minister forgot to mention it this morning—by the establishment of two new zones that are closer to the community and closer to our units, with extra resources that now travel around to the units and engage with them. We've increased a lot of the training—again, through the enhancements, particularly in the flood rescue space. Also, one of the important things for volunteers is that training and social interaction in the unit, and we're really putting a lot of effort through our zone operational readiness operators and our new deputy zone commanders across the State to engage with those volunteers and ensure that we have retention. We're also trialling a youth internship program so that we can gather young community members so that they might see that they have a path into volunteering for the NSW State Emergency Service.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I put the same question to the RFS Commissioner this morning. Of the 10,500 volunteers that you've got on the books, how many of those are trained—up to date with their training—active members versus names on the books?

CARLENE YORK: I can't break it down as clearly as Commissioner Rogers did this morning, but, as an example, during the 2021-22 floods, we had 7,000 volunteers who went out into the field. Again, we have very active volunteers as well as those volunteers who are still registered with us who will come out when their community most needs them. We did approximately, at a minimum, 1.5 million hours during that year of floods. We know that not all volunteers have the time to record their hours, so that's at a minimum. Certainly, the volunteers came forward to help not only their community but communities across the State.

Dr AMANDA COHN: If I could ask you as well about I think it was called the Volunteering Reimagined program. I know there were some efforts made to include more spontaneous or informal volunteers within SES units. What's been the progress on that type of initiative?

CARLENE YORK: That was a program that started before I started as commissioner. Again, we're trying to renew our spontaneous volunteers. There is a project that the Premier's Department is leading in relation to increasing volunteers across all volunteer emergency services agencies. Particularly in relation to the spontaneous volunteers, it probably falls within two categories. One is those who come out and just help on the day, but there is a registered process where they can register with us. Although related, we have put a lot of money into our health and wellbeing programs, and those registered spontaneous volunteers are now included in our assistance for them in their health and wellbeing as well.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Fantastic. That's really good to hear. Do you have the numbers for how many registered spontaneous volunteers you've got?

CARLENE YORK: I will try to get that. I don't have them right here, but I will try to get them before the end of the day.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. I would appreciate that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll start with you, Mr Fewtrell. Obviously, congratulations yet again. Well done on getting the role, although it might be a little bit of a poisoned chalice once we get through the rest of these questions. What action are you prepared to take against the unions for putting political messages on publicly owned property, including trucks and buildings?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We'll manage any of those issues as they arise and deal with them accordingly. Obviously, as public servants we've got obligations to serve the government of the day and remain impartial so they'll be the parameters that we'll use. A key part of that is obviously having the channels of communication open with the union, being able to talk to them if they were considering that sort of action and provide them a clear understanding of what the parameters are—then also, ideally, if we're able to, to head those things off from getting to that point.

The Hon. WES FANG: Has the Minister given you any direction as to his views on the way that he expects you and other senior management to approach that issue?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you expect the Minister to provide you some guidance as to how he expects you to handle that issue?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: I'm not sure there. We'll work that through. Obviously, the Minister and I are only just establishing our relationship as commissioner and Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: You can put your foot down now and you can start it early. In relation to that, what's your view? If you came across it, how would you handle it right now?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: The biggest priority for me is Fire and Rescue having a very professional image presented to the community.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you think that aids that image?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I don't think it does anything to enhance that. At times I understand that there are concerns that will be raised by the workforce and by their representative body. It's just a question of what are the best ways to express that.

The Hon. WES FANG: You'll note obviously the Minister and I had a little bit of a discussion, we'll call it, about the way that the budget has been structured for this year. Obviously he indicated that, in his view, there was a budget increase. But in reality, when we saw the actual outlay from the previous financial year to what has been budgeted for the coming financial year, there appears to be an \$8 million deficit from what was actually spent last year even though we're looking at more severe conditions in this financial year. Are you expecting to have to cut services, or are you looking to have to cut the, say, upgrade of equipment in order to support the Government's reduced budget?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, we've got an increase in our expendable budget of a hundred—the budget's gone up from last year.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's on the budgeted figures, though, isn't that right?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: ERE from \$664 million to \$766 million.

The Hon. WES FANG: But if we're comparing that figure not to the budgeted figure from the last financial year but to the actual figure that was spent by the Government, we're looking at a decrease, aren't we? If we're looking at actuals versus what's been budgeted—

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Actuals against budgeted, yes. But there are obviously things that we will do to bring control—

The Hon. WES FANG: What are those things?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We'll look at whatever things we need to do, particularly not affecting frontline service delivery. So any sort of behind-the-scenes-type costs that we can reduce or eliminate, we'll be looking at those sorts of areas

The Hon. WES FANG: So, effectively, you're looking at an efficiency dividend, is that right? Something that you're looking to be able to make up that loss, that shortfall?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Like all agencies, we've got obligations to meet the financial management expectations. We'll be managing the organisation as best we can to achieve that budget figure.

The Hon. WES FANG: What we call operational savings or whatever, most people call cuts. So what are you planning to cut?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: As I say, we'll take things on a case-by-case basis. We'll look at—

The Hon. WES FANG: I know, but you must have some view by now?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: There are some things we can do there to identify spending around non-necessary items and so forth.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are we going to see a situation in your organisation that we've seen in the RFS, where there's not enough fuel to put in the truck?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I don't believe so. We'll always make sure we take necessary measures to ensure our crews are well supported and resourced and they've got the equipment and training to be able to do their job.

The Hon. WES FANG: So we've got, before the inflationary pressures that we've seen, an \$8 million shortfall from what was actually expended in the last financial year to now. How are you going to factor in any increases in expenditure that come by way of inflation? Because obviously it would seem that, with an \$8 million cut on what's expended just on its own, there are going to have to be some cuts somewhere. Then, factoring in inflation on top of that, we're talking about tens of millions of dollars that your budget is short. Isn't that right, Commissioner?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: There are things we can do to prioritise the spending. We can delay some things if we needed to, defer some projects that are non-essential.

The Hon. WES FANG: But when you're talking about delays, are we not talking about things like upgrades to fire trucks or old equipment that the frontline services need to be able to do their job?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: As I said before, we'll always make sure that our—and the priority for me is to make sure our firefighters are well equipped and able to do their job on the front line as well as possible.

The Hon. WES FANG: Before you took the job, did you talk to the Minister about the cuts that happened to your organisation and did you petition him to actually increase the budget?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you planning to petition the Minister to increase your budget?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: I think any of the emergency services commissioners are always looking for opportunities to see additional resources come to them. I think the biggest question and most important thing is do we have enough to be able to provide the services that the Government and the community expect and require?

The Hon. WES FANG: It would seem at the moment that you don't. Because certainly if you had an expenditure that's \$8 million below what's been budgeted this year, there must be some concerns as to the way that you're going to be able to deliver your frontline services. Would that not be a fair assumption?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I think we'll be able to manage through those challenges. We'll be able to look at the things that we need to prioritise and adjust accordingly.

The Hon. WES FANG: For example, I guess you've got the need for things like PPE, safety gear—is that the sort of gear that we're looking to reduce costs in? Because if it's not manpower and if it's not the services that are being delivered, it must be the gear. Is that not right? Are we looking to use older gear or are we looking to recycle stuff a bit more?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, not at all. We've actually structured our funding for our protective clothing to be well scheduled into the budget and forward budget estimates. We've got that on a regular schedule now. Previously we were needing significant large boosts of funding to address that whereas now it'll be regularly cycled through. So there'll be more scheduled top-ups throughout the yearly cycles rather than one big lot every six or seven years.

The Hon. WES FANG: The \$8 million that was short for the staffing—you've now got a commitment from the Government that you're going to have over 600 new firefighters joining the ranks as well. Where's the money going to come from? Where are the firefighters going to come from? How are you going to deliver that with the cuts that the Minister's provided to you?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We're working with the Government to identify the phasing and the plans to bring those additional firefighters into the organisation. They are going to be phased in over a number of years. There's not a significant huge increase all of a sudden. With that would obviously need to come appropriate funding to cover the additional staff.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've done well. A bit of a baptism of fire but that's all right. You're certainly up to the job. I'll move to the SES now. Commissioner, did you provide the Minister any advice in relation to the mergers that were proposed in the flood inquiry? What was your and your organisation's position on that finding of the inquiry?

CARLENE YORK: Yes, that recommendation out of the inquiry came as quite a surprise to me because I hadn't been spoken to about it. When you read the report, it did talk about backroom merger. And it wasn't clear whether it's the shared services type merger or whether it's operations. Most of my organisation was quite upset about that because they are very devoted volunteers to what they do—as well as staff members. One of the issues, obviously, is we're based in Wollongong and so it brought a lot of concern from our staff members about if they would be relocated and what would that mean for their own personal lives. There was a lot of anguish and distress in relation to that. I have passed that on to the Minister.

That recommendation was not fully accepted by the previous Government; it was accepted in principle. We were in discussions about what that would mean in relation to any merger or sharing of resources or whatever term you might like to use, and those discussions have continued on with this Minister. Obviously this Government had said prior to the election outcome that it did not support the merger, so we've been working very hard in relation to interoperability and how we can be supported by not only RFS but also Fire and Rescue and other emergency service agencies, and how we can support them during whatever challenges they have for natural hazards.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is that the advice you gave to the Minister when he was coming into his role?

CARLENE YORK: I didn't. I don't recall ever speaking to the Minister prior to him being the Minister about that issue.

The Hon. WES FANG: But when he was made the Minister, I imagine that you would have had initial briefings and subsequent briefings that have happened right up until now. I'm guessing that you've made the point that you saw your organisation as being completely one to be separated out and to remain that way. Is that right?

CARLENE YORK: I have voiced that opinion that I think the SES really performs and delivers its services to the community very well under the structure that it is. But the Minister was always clear in public statements pre- and post-election that he did not support the merger.

The Hon. WES FANG: I didn't get the opportunity to ask the RFS commissioner before he had to depart, but I imagine—and you may know this, you may not—that they probably shared a similar view. Would that fair to say?

CARLENE YORK: I think there were some statements in the public by the RFS volunteer association. But Commissioner Rogers and I have worked harmoniously in trying to locate opportunities for furthering the relationship between the two organisations. Again, there is a steering committee led by the Premier's Department where we have looked at some of the ways in which we do business. For example, we have very much committed to training volunteers and others from other agencies in relation to that flood rescue capacity. We've recently launched a bushfire awareness course for my volunteers so that they can help into this forthcoming fire season.

The Hon. WES FANG: I might ask the RFS deputy commissioner to come forward, if we could?

CARLENE YORK: There's no-one here now from the RFS.

The Hon. WES FANG: No-one left? I thought we still had—no, okay, we've got no-one here from RFS. That's all right, you can answer for everybody then. I'm sure they'll be absolutely pleased that you're going to answer.

CARLENE YORK: I don't know whether Commissioner Rogers would like that!

The Hon. WES FANG: No, I won't do that to you.

CARLENE YORK: I don't think we're that interoperable yet.

The Hon. WES FANG: I guess that's the question that I was going to ask. Can you provide some insights as to—I imagine that once the finding was made that you would have had to have some conversations between both the organisations as to how you were perhaps going to make any merger that was on the table work. Could you provide some insights as to those conversations and what was considered as a viable solution in relation to any mergers that may or may not happen?

CARLENE YORK: I can't recall any conversations about any mergers. As I said, the previous Government only accepted the recommendation in principle to be further worked on and this Government was very clear about not having mergers. But we have had many conversations about things we already do. For example, RFS were critical in assisting us during the record floods that the State has suffered for the last three years. They have worked with us in the operation centres. They've assisted us with doorknocking. They've done damage assessments. They've done a variety of things that they do all across the State all the time. It was looking at projects—for example, RFS wanted a new workers comp system and safety management system and we did too, so we're working on how we could align that. There's the computer-aided dispatch system that the agencies are looking at working on. We're already, for example, not just on RFS, but we're on the SAP system for Fire and Rescue. It was looking at what we already do and how we could capitalise on some future enhancements or future projects.

The Hon. WES FANG: Because both organisations are renowned for working well together, right?

CARLENE YORK: I would say in the majority of cases they're working very well together.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's good. In that respect, then, has the Minister provided any direction to you at all in relation to the ways in which the two organisations can better collaborate, for want of a better word, in relation to emergencies, given that there was a clear view from the inquiry that there needed to be greater collaboration in relation to effort in relation to the delivery of services? The Government's decided to not adopt that position, but surely the Minister must have actually spoken to you and RFS about working out ways that you can collaborate better in response to State emergencies?

CARLENE YORK: He's given no direction to me about what should be done, but he's been very clear of using the words and the terms "interoperability". He wanted us to work better. As I say, that's a project led by jointly led by Premier's Department, RFS and the New South Wales SES to come up with some of those strategies to do that. You've got to remember that also, within the budget that we have, it's not possible to come up with a brand new IT system, for example, across all emergency service agencies because it just wasn't going to be able to get the capacity to be able to implement those things. But there are a number of projects where we have been working together—and successfully, I would say.

The Hon. WES FANG: I think this has apexed nicely to where I wanted it to head to. What we're looking at now is potentially moving into one of the most concerning seasons ahead for fire—for any number of emergencies that we're looking at—with conditions the way that they are, El Niño predicted by BOM et cetera. We're seven months into this new Government. The Government has failed to adopt the recommendations of the flood inquiry that your two organisations work better together. I've asked you directly what work the Minister has done in relation to asking you to collaborate well with RFS et cetera, and it seems the Minister's provided no direction whatsoever. How do the people of New South Wales expect that the two organisations that the Labor Government said would not be merged are going to work well together in an emergency when there's been no direction from the Minister to start that collaborative process?

CARLENE YORK: I wouldn't exactly agree with that. He hasn't directed me as to what projects we should be doing. He's directed the Premier's Department to work with RFS and SES—

The Hon. WES FANG: But this is what we're seeing all the time, isn't it?

CARLENE YORK: —to come up with some strategies that we've already commenced on. We've already completed some of these strategies.

The Hon. WES FANG: Computer systems are all great and everything else, but we're talking about potential high-risk frontline issues around fire, emergency evacuations and emergency responses. There's a clear finding from that inquiry that your two organisations need to work better together. We know that traditionally that hasn't always been the case. Now you're saying that there's been no direct work between the two organisations to have that service delivery streamlined. The Minister has not provided any direct instruction to you and the Premier's office is doing exactly what Labor does and having a review.

CARLENE YORK: No, that's not quite correct. We're already doing things to be interoperable besides what came out of the review. We're certainly all members of the Local Emergency Management Committee, where we work at the ground level with the community about delivering our services. Again, we're members of the State Emergency Management Committee, where we work with all government departments in relation to delivering our services. I'm the chair of the capability development steering committee, which looks at how we can develop the capability across government to be able to respond to some of the challenges that we know we're facing in the environment. I have already trained or had joint training in relation to incident command positions. We've trained RFS in a lot of flood rescue positions. We've got two aviation personnel down working out of RFS that can help them through their season as well as—

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate all that.

CARLENE YORK: But these are all things that have been developed for interoperability.

The Hon. WES FANG: My concern is that places like the Northern Rivers—how many volunteers do you have on the Northern Rivers?

CARLENE YORK: I can tell you that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Have the RFS volunteers been trained in flood rescue? I'm just getting the question in before my time goes off.

CARLENE YORK: Yes. Some of them have been trained in flood rescue. For example, we've onboarded an additional 369 volunteer members in the Northern Rivers and 14 staff members. We've established a new north-eastern zone headquarters based out of Goonellabah, which was not there before. We were running out of Newcastle. With that comes additional staff members, additional training staff as well as additional IC staff. We've onboarded—sorry, an SES project team has been established up there and completed replacing the vehicles and giving more vehicles up there. We've got two additional fleets, being a light storm vehicle and command vehicle. We've also placed a Unimog, which is a high-clearance vehicle, up there. So we have listened very clearly to what the recommendations of that inquiry were. We've listened to the community. We worked with our other emergency service agencies, not only RFS, Fire and Rescue, VRA, surf lifesaving particularly in relation to the use of drones and personnel, and built the capacity for Northern Rivers.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sorry, I know my time went off. The RFS volunteers that have been trained in flood rescue, did you have that figure by any chance?

CARLENE YORK: Yes.

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Just while Commissioner York is looking for that, I just add, in my 26 years in emergency services I've never seen the level of interaction and interoperability as we have now. There is very close connection between ourselves, SES and RFS. We have trained additional staff in swift water, in-water rescue, complementing their locations in the Northern Rivers with SES. So there has been coordination between the agencies to not only meet the recommendations of the flood inquiry, but to look at it in a holistic sense and to put them in the best locations between the different agencies.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you suggesting that the SES and Fire and Rescue NSW should have been merged?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I'm just saying—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm joking.

JEREMY FEWTRELL: —that we're all working really well together.

The CHAIR: I have some further questions about Youth Justice. I know that the department published an overview of statistics and key characteristics of young people in Youth Justice NSW. It's quite concerning to see that the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people remanded in custody increased to 1,783 individuals in 2022-23, which is almost 500 individuals more than the year before. I am wondering if there

is any information about why there was that increase and also if the department is doing anything in that space specifically?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Firstly, can I acknowledge the challenge. Just to deal with the headline statistics, as of 29 October there are 212 young people in custody. Sorry, I apologise, 212; 161 of those are on remand; and 64 per cent, that being 103, of those people are Aboriginal young people. So there is a very real challenge. The point to be made about the work of Youth Justice is we receive what is referred to us through the justice system and it is very much the case that the majority of young people coming into care are on remand. The practice in respect of bail refused, I have the figures in front of me now. That is a particular challenge for us.

In terms of the operation of the youth justice system and the six youth detention centres across the State, a further challenge is that because bail is such a driver of those remand numbers, that very often they enter into custody for a very short period of time, which in terms of constructive intervention, care for young people, doing the work that we would want to do, that there are restrictions. But it is a function of, quite frankly, policing practice, what is determined by the courts and the various practices in relation to police bail and bail refused by courts. If I can offer, I have a trove of statistics I am happy to provide—those are review statistics—to the Committee on notice if that will assist.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely, thank you. Did you have something further?

SIMONE CZECH: Yes, if I could just to add to the secretary's response, we are seeing an almost 20-year low in the number of youth crime charges across the State, which is a good thing. However, we are seeing particular categories of offence increase quite significantly and I don't think anyone on this Committee will be surprised when I say motor vehicle theft has increased significantly, particularly in our regional areas and that is in the vicinity of 179 per cent increase, about a 50 per cent increase in metropolitan areas. So that is contributing to some of the numbers and certainly Aboriginal young people are overrepresented in those numbers.

We have a range of predominantly place-based programs that, in particular, provide support to Aboriginal young people who are in contact with the youth justice system—they are in places like Moree, Dubbo, Tamworth—working with local Aboriginal community-controlled organisations, community-led programs, really to offer supports to those young people to try and prevent them actually coming back once they are exiting detention. We also have our flagship Youth on Track program. About 330 young people last year participated in that program and that is certainly successful for Aboriginal young people who participate in that program. And there is a raft of other programs that we could elaborate on or provide on notice if that is helpful for the Committee as well.

The CHAIR: That would be great, thank you. On the statistics as well, it also states that 93 per cent of young people in 2022-23 exit youth justice into safe and appropriate accommodation. I just want to know how safe and appropriate accommodation is actually defined, or how that is decided?

CANDICE NEILSON: We would argue that a young person needs to have accommodation as a foundational underpinning for success in the community. A safe place of accommodation would be somewhere where the young person reports feeling safe, a place that's free from violence, free from abuse, free from neglect. Those are the defining factors of what we would call safe and appropriate housing.

The CHAIR: I am just wondering how long that is tracked for? If somebody was assessed to be moving into safe and appropriate accommodation, but that fell through a month later, what would happen in that situation and how long is that accommodation stability tracked after the person leaves?

CANDICE NEILSON: A critical factor when a young person is making the transition from custody into community is having really clear reintegration plans in place for the young people for accommodation but for a whole range of other services, like mental health supports, drug and alcohol supports, all of those kinds of supports that will keep a young person from coming back into custody. From the moment a young person comes into Youth Justice custody they are assigned a caseworker and that caseworker works with that young person and significant other people in the young person's life to develop a really clear plan for that young person while they are in custody, but also to help them make the transition back into the community. That would include making really clear plans about accommodation.

When they are released, we don't always maintain supervision for young people. Young people, particularly young people who are coming in and out on remand, we may not have any supervision responsibility for those young people. So it is really critical for us that we refer them into and connect them with appropriate services in the community. To that end, we fund in the vicinity of around \$30 million annually various funded services programs. Only a small proportion of that is around housing and accommodation supports but the other parts of that are providing that wraparound casework support, so that when the young person's time with Youth Justice ends, when our, I suppose, mandate if you like, ends for that person, they have other community-based

supports that can continue to track and monitor and support them to try and prevent that reoffending and coming back into the custody circle.

The CHAIR: I also have some questions around the Try a Trade program. The Government recently rolled out its Try a Trade program for young people in custody. Is this the first time a program like this has been offered by Youth Justice?

CANDICE NEILSON: The Try a Trade is quite a specific program where we bring into our custodial centres a whole range of different tradies, if you will, or people from a whole range of different professions to try and show young people what possible options there are for them post-release in terms of education and employment outcomes. It is one way that we help young people make that connection into an employment pathway. Another way that we do that is through the education training units that operate in each of the six Youth Justice Centres around the State. Those units are staffed and operated by Department of Education staff. Young people can continue on with education units that they may have already been doing while they were in the community. Or for many young people who come into Youth Justice, they've previously disengaged with education, so it's a really great opportunity for young people to understand what they're good at, where their skills are, where their strengths lie, both in an educational and vocational capacity. There's opportunities for young people to discover and progress on career pathways through those education modules that they complete within our education training units as well.

The CHAIR: What has the uptake or response to the program been so far?

CANDICE NEILSON: Of the Try a Trade specifically?

The CHAIR: Yes.

CANDICE NEILSON: I don't have those figures at hand, but we can provide some detail on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I just wanted to know if gender parity had been taken into account when developing this program? Have steps been taken to ensure that young women and girls are also being encouraged to try out a trade via that program?

CANDICE NEILSON: That's a great question, and yes is the short answer. Today in custody we've got 209 young people in custody, and 13 of those are young women who are housed exclusively at our Reiby centre out in Airs in Western Sydney. There is a Try a Trade program that is happening imminently, or about to happen. We are specifically bringing in female tradies, again to show young women what some of those alternate career pathways are that they may not have previously considered. It is really important in Youth Justice that programs are designed and delivered specifically for young women. There is a risk, because they are such a small proportion of our overall population, that they can be an afterthought, I suppose, or that programs could be developed for young men and then retrofitted for young women. So we're really conscious of purposely designing programs, like the Try a Trade, specifically to meet the needs of young women in our facilities.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I apologise if I'm repeating any ask for data. I've tried really hard to pay attention but I've been in the other one as well, playing with budgets. The crossbench is limited and we cover as much ground as we possibly—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That's not good enough Sue, sorry!

The Hon. EMILY SUVAAL: You do a good job, Sue.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We cover so much ground. Earlier I was asking about how many people under 18 were incarcerated. I got those figures, thank you. How many are children who are under 14? Do we have that figure?

SIMONE CZECH: We do.

CANDICE NEILSON: Today there's one young person who's 12; there's three young people who are 13—that's under 14 then. So four in total.

SIMONE CZECH: And no 10- or 11-year-olds.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: That's a relief. How many at 14?

CANDICE NEILSON: Ten 14-year-olds today.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What are we tracking in terms of the cost per child per day?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: It is \$2,700 a day.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What is the average period of time children are spending at the moment? Have you got that average?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Remand at the moment is quite—it has been in a growth phase. To make the point, 60 per cent of admissions are currently less than 24 hours; 70 per cent of admissions are less than 72 hours. Of the total admissions in the 2022-23 year, 9 per cent went on to receive a custodial sentence.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do we know what that average period of sentence was?

CANDICE NEILSON: I have it here, Secretary, if it's helpful.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Please.

CANDICE NEILSON: In 2022 their overall median length of stay in custody was one day and the average was 22. We deliberately report on the median because the average is so skewed because of the outliers of really short stays versus those who have a sentence and spend a longer time in custody.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: In respect of control order, the median length of stay is 76.5, and the average was 120. In respect of remand, as has been said, one day and the average was 16 days.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What is the most common reason at the moment for remand?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: That is a very complex question. I think that part of the answer is—and I've already indicated that I'm happy to provide these to the Committee—it in part turns on police, practices with police bail and court bail refused.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is one of the reasons for that the unsafety of returning to an address? Are we aware of that as a factor?

CANDICE NEILSON: I can speak to that. Partly, that's the answer. Police, when they're faced with a young person who they've just arrested and they have to make a very difficult decision as to whether they can grant bail and have that person go back into the community for a period of time before they return to court, have to weigh up a whole range of factors. One of those is does this young person have a safe and appropriate place to return to, which makes them more likely to turn up to court. There's a whole range of other factors, including how the young person is presenting at the time and what the charges are that the young person is facing. What we're seeing overall is a gap in supports and services for young people. If police knew that they could have supports and services that were wrapped around those young people universally, across the State, then I think it would be a much easier decision to grant bail than the point.

What happens, though, is the police may bail refuse and the young person will return to court—usually the next day. By the time the young person turns up at court the next day, having been in Youth Justice custody, there's a whole range of information available to the court that makes it far easier for them to grant the bail to the young person. So essentially we see the short-term remand, because there's a difference between the information available to police at the time of making the arrest as to whether they can grant bail versus the next day when they turn up at court and there's a whole lot of information. So it's easier for the court to grant bail. We are doing a whole lot of work in this space to address this issue. We're working really closely with our colleagues in police, particularly in the police youth command and also with the Children's Court, the Aboriginal Legal Service and with Legal Aid. We've got a couple of pilot locations. One is down in Wagga Wagga in the Riverina area.

The Hon. WES FANG: Great area.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Wes loves Wagga Wagga.

CANDICE NEILSON: Also one is in south-western Sydney, where we're actually trying a whole different range of tools to give police more information in the moment so they can make those bail decisions more easily.⁵ But we are also making available those wraparound supports that I talked about so that young people have the support that they need between being arrested and having to turn up to court on the charges so that they're not likely to breach their bail.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What's the cause of the service gap? Is it funding? What are we looking at in terms of trying to address that?

⁵ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Ms Candice Neilson, Acting Executive Director, Youth Justice NSW, clarified the evidence given.

CANDICE NEILSON: What we're looking at, as I just mentioned, is speaking with a whole range of different service partners, both in the Government and non-government sector, and particularly given the overrepresentation of Aboriginal young people, in the Aboriginal community-controlled organisation sector. We know that the best people to make decisions about Aboriginal young people are Aboriginal people. We're doing a lot of work in Youth Justice to look at opportunities to fund ACCOs to deliver locally-led, place-based solutions.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I got the remand figure. How many Aboriginal children are on remand? What's that number? I didn't get that one.

CANDICE NEILSON: Today?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, please.

CANDICE NEILSON: Remandees, we've got 160 in total, 97 per cent of whom are Aboriginal.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Gosh.

CANDICE NEILSON: Sorry, 97 children, not 97 per cent. Did I say per cent?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes. So it's 97 children out of the 160?

CANDICE NEILSON: So 80 per cent of the Aboriginal kids in custody today are on remand.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I can assist further. The aggregate of young people in custody, as at 29 October, 61 per cent were Aboriginal young people. Of those on remand, 64 per cent as of that date, or 103, were Aboriginal young people.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: We all know the remand figure is a real problem and that that is the growth figure that we have seen over the last little while. I am sure there's good work happening. Is there anything that you can see on the front lines of this work that we could be doing to accelerate that—to just be stopping that police decision across the State? It's fantastic that we've got Wagga Wagga. Is there something else that we can be doing across the State to punch that remand figure down? As you say, if we are looking at police remand, the comparison to court release the following day, which is really big, that difference, and the success of being released—what else can we be doing? You can see this; you've got full visibility. What else can we be doing?

CANDICE NEILSON: I would say more of the same. I'm not sure if you were here, but I mentioned a little bit earlier that Youth Justice fund around \$30 million annually of programs for young people—not just for Aboriginal young people but for all young people—in our system. Those programs span the full, I suppose, continuum of care, if you like, from really early intervention, when they are just starting to get in trouble with the police, right through until reintegration, when they have been in our system for some period of time and they are going back into the community. So more of the same.

There are a lot of lessons that we have learnt from all of those different programs about what works in this area. What we know is that their solutions are slightly different for every community, hence why we are really adopting this place-based option and particularly talking to local Aboriginal communities, local Aboriginal stakeholders, but also our Aboriginal workforce in Youth Justice. We've got a really significant, incredibly skilled Aboriginal workforce in Youth Justice; they make up about 8 per cent of our staffing population. We've got a number of different advisory mechanisms to have the work that's being undertaken in Youth Justice Aboriginal led, because, as I said before, if we look at what the Closing the Gap priority reforms tell us, it's that we need that Aboriginal decision-making; we need that Aboriginal leadership to get—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just ask one final question? Out of the four under-14-year-olds that are currently in custody, how many of those children are Aboriginal children?

CANDICE NEILSON: Three of the four.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If I could ask my question to the Commissioner of Fire and Rescue. Earlier today the Minister referred to negotiations towards a new death and disability award for Fire and Rescue NSW members. What is the status of those negotiations?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Those awards—the death and disability award and both the permanent and the retained reward—were all finalised, I think it was, 17 October, and they were ratified by the Industrial Relations Commission.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Who proposed the removal of occupational physicians conducting health checks to the award negotiations?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: I wasn't in the discussions, the negotiations, at that stage. It's my understanding that it was a proposal from the union, and it became a point of negotiation.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Why do you think the health checks are important?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Well, it is generally a bit of a problem in society, getting males to go to doctors. Apart from anything else, it's important that we do what we can to encourage people to have regular health checks and engagement with their doctors. There is, obviously, also then an occupational element related to that as well.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you think that firefighters are at elevated risk of a health episode because of the stress of their work, especially now?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: There's a range of factors unique to firefighting. Obviously, the conditions that our firefighters work in are quite taxing, with the high temperatures and the loads that we carry with the equipment. So there are some unique factors to firefighting that do have some impacts on health.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You said you weren't involved in, but do you know whether a risk assessment was done?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I will take that on notice. But there was certainly extensive consideration given to the decisions around and the new format of the health checks.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Would that be in writing? Would you be able to provide a copy to the Committee?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: As I said, I will take it on notice. It depends on what documentation we've got.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What are the consequences for a worker who has an unsatisfactory result in a health check?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: The outcome of their health check will be flagged by their health practitioner to Fire and Rescue's health team, and then there will be an assessment done, based on the nature of the identified issue and the conditions related to that and then any suitable types of duties or restrictions that would need to be considered for that individual.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I still have a couple of questions about Youth Justice and the recidivism and where we are tracking with that. At the moment I'm really interested in if we've got data around the rates of children returning to incarceration within two years.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes, I do.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I thought you might, Mr Tidball. Thank you.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If this answers your question, in respect—and this is BOCSAR data, dated 31 March. In relation to reoffending rates of young people, 70.4 per cent of young people who completed a custodial supervision order in the 12 months ending March 2022 did not receive a subsequent custodial sentence within 12 months of release, for a new offence; that figure for Aboriginal young people was 63.3 per cent. In relation to supervised community orders, 50.2 per cent of young people who commenced a supervised community order in the 12 months ending March 2022 did not have further contact with the justice system within 12 months; in relation to Aboriginal young people, that figure was 39.1 per cent. Just given the relevance of Youth Justice conferencing, because it's becoming a pretty vital part of the system, 66.6 per cent of young people who participated in a Youth Justice conference in the 12 months ending March 2022 had no further contact with the justice system within 12 months, and that figure for Aboriginal young people was 56.9 per cent.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: From memory, that sounds like an improvement in terms of responses.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Yes.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I suspect that's the kind of switching on of some of the newer youth conferencing procedures. But what about for longer periods? Do we have any visibility on recidivism of young people from a five- or 10-year program, accepting that those better programs weren't available?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Ms Higginson, can I take that on notice and talk with BOCSAR?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you. I'm really interested in that. I think it's a way that we get to track how these newer programs are efficient and effective or not, so the five and 10-year mark is really important. Thank you, and I would be very grateful.

The CHAIR: We will now break for a short 15-minute afternoon tea break before we return at 3.45 p.m.

(Short adjournment)

The CHAIR: I will throw straightaway to the Opposition for further questioning.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If I could have the Commissioner for Fire and Rescue again, sorry—well, not sorry. Just returning to my previous comment, can you confirm that the Fire Brigade Employees' Union proposed the removal of the requirement that occupational physicians oversee health checks for Fire and Rescue?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Yes, that was part of its log of claims for the award negotiations, but it was proposed to have some other alternate one, which is where we have landed with the health screening program.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Can you confirm that the proposal was included in the finalised award arrangement that was on 17 October?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you aware of whether a risk assessment was completed by your agency in advance of the negotiations?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: No, I am not.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You are not aware?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: I will take that on notice.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you aware of whether your agency provided advice to the Minister on the ramifications of the proposal?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We certainly kept the Minister's office updated. The issue of the health screenings was quite a key focus in the negotiations, so there were a number of conversations with the Minister's office about the proposed trial. What has been agreed is a 36-month trial to the health screening process.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you aware of the context in which the provision in the award was first introduced?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Can you ask that question again?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Are you aware of the context in which this provision in the award was first introduced, in terms of having the occupational—

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Yes, it dated back to the original development of the death and disability award back in 2003.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: But it also came out of recommendations from the Waterfall special commission of inquiry as well. There were some recommendations in there.

JEREMY FEWTRELL: That is correct.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Would you agree that this change increases risk to public safety?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: We are going to maintain that the firefighters are having regular screenings with their doctors. I am quite comfortable with the position that the doctors and their GPs know their health better than anyone else because that is their regular medical professional. We had issues and challenges with the initial health checks program. There were a lot of delays, a lot of complications, and a lot of people who were parked off full duties for several months at a time, going through additional checks that then didn't end up identifying anything. So there was a lot of distrust between the firefighters and the union about the health checks. It wasn't working well. But, similarly, it wasn't working well for us as an organisation either.

This new trial will be an opportunity for us to try a different approach. The health check system had only been operational for a few years. I think this is a continual, iterative process of working through some different approaches to it. As I said, this is a trial. We will take the feedback and the results of the trial and then make a decision about what the long-term option might be in relation to health screening.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: As you said, it is a 36-month trial. What do you think that would look like in practice?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: The firefighters will have an extensive checklist that they take with them to an appointment with their general practitioner. In addition to the examination with the GP, there is also a range of pathology-type tests that need to get done and reported back to the GP. If any of the screening or assessments identify any areas of concern—and that is against the checklist and the information provided to the individual GP—that is referred to the Fire and Rescue NSW occupational physician and then assessments will be made around the suitability of alternate duties or any other adjustments that need to be put in place for that individual.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Prior to your involvement as commissioner, were you involved in any of the negotiations?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: I went to one or two of the discussions, but there were other members of the executive engaged with it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What capacity would that have been in?

JEREMY FEWTRELL: That I attended?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes.

JEREMY FEWTRELL: Look, I can't remember the exact topics that were in discussion at those particular times. I joined the negotiations for one or two meetings, as I said, just because I had the opportunity to.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Draper, how many applications were received for a buyback in the Resilient Homes Program?

SIMON DRAPER: I did answer that question a little bit earlier in the session, but I used the round number of over 7,000. I am just going to check. I think the number I have is about 7,700. So 7,800 registered.

The Hon. WES FANG: The next part of that is can you break that down into regions?

SIMON DRAPER: I have been asked for that on notice. In fact, I am going to table it if I can get my hands on it. I have been asked for it by LGA.

The Hon. WES FANG: The next thing I am going to ask is how many applications were received for retrofit by region as well, and how many applications were received for house raising by region? I am not sure if you took all of these on notice previously.

SIMON DRAPER: No, but the question was asked earlier. As I explained earlier, the registrations for the Resilient Homes Program are not done by house treatment. People don't register a buyback, a retrofit or a raising; they just register. Then it's determined what is the most appropriate treatment for that home, if any.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to that, how many have actually been completed so far? Has that been asked yet?

SIMON DRAPER: No, that one hasn't been asked. I have the number here, actually. In terms of buybacks, there have been 749, I think, offers made—I am just going to find my numbers again. Yes, 749 offers have been made and 393 have been accepted. In terms of retrofits and raisings, we have not started the process of making those firm offers yet. We have identified around 400 homes that might qualify for those.

The Hon. WES FANG: So you have 400 on offer, but so far none of them have been retrofitted or raised?

SIMON DRAPER: No, there have been a number of home repairs on a different scheme. So that is a different type of thing. That is getting people back into homes that provide them with a dignified and comfortable way of life. But retrofits and raisings are all about treatments for future flood risk.

The Hon. WES FANG: How many homes have received a guarantee that they are eligible under the program? Have we asked that yet?

SIMON DRAPER: No. It is not a question of being eligible or being guaranteed that they are eligible. What we are doing is saying that there are different levels of risk for different homes. With the money that is available—quite a lot of money, \$700 million, is available—we are trying to identify which of the homes we would prioritise with the funds available to get those treatments to reduce the risks to those homes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Packaging all that up—some you have taken on notice; some you have been able to provide answers to—are you able to provide an average cost per buyback for the program?

SIMON DRAPER: I'm sure we have got that. It is \$589,000.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can you provide a breakdown of that figure between admin costs and what goes directly to the home owner?

SIMON DRAPER: I believe that that figure is the amount that goes to the home owner. That is the value of the home.

The Hon. WES FANG: So there are no admin costs in that 589? That's the money that's paid to the home owner at an average?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you able to provide a cost of the admin of the scheme per application?

SIMON DRAPER: I think I have that. I'll just find the right note. Apologies, Mr Fang. I will find the right note. Maybe you can ask the next question and I'll look for it while I'm answering that one.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. Could you provide a breakdown of the electorates where the buybacks have occurred or where they're eligible to occur?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have to hand by electorate. There are seven local government areas. There's Tweed, Byron, Ballina, Richmond Valley, Kyogle, Lismore—is that seven?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And Clarence, isn't it?

SIMON DRAPER: And Clarence. Thank you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you know how much of the \$700 million has been allocated to date?

SIMON DRAPER: Again, it relates to the number of offers that have been made. There are 649 offers and 393 acceptances. What we do is say there's a firm liability, if you like, for payments of those 393, but we make provision for the other offers that have been made and future offers that will be made, assuming that a number of them will be accepted as well. So we'd expect most of the \$700 million to be absorbed in that process, but there will be a point at which we take stock and see whether there's money left in the program. Then there's the \$100 million that the Government has—

The Hon. WES FANG: Tranche two.

SIMON DRAPER: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: We're going to come to tranche two very shortly. If you find that you have money left over in tranche one, how and when do you expect that will be spent? What's the priority? When do you see it being rolled out?

SIMON DRAPER: What we've committed to doing is seeing through the current round. We contacted home owners in June, and since then over a number of months, and advised them where they stand in the program. We've committed to work through those offers. Then once we've taken stock and seen how much money is left, we've got a group of community leaders who we meet with every fortnight in the Northern Rivers, which comprises all the mayors and general managers but also all the members of Parliament, both State Parliament and Federal Parliament. While that's not a decision-making body in its own right, we seek input from those community leaders on how they think the money should be best allocated in the future, and we take that back and provide advice to government on that. But we haven't got to that point yet.

The Hon. WES FANG: How long before the money is spent?

SIMON DRAPER: That will depend on the time it takes for home owners to receive offers and accept those offers. One of the things I should emphasise is that we're trying to get out of the race-to-spend-money mindset because the feedback from a lot of the people who are prioritised or have received offers is what they need more than anything else is time to consider that and time to re-establish themselves. It's fine to get an offer to have your home bought, but you need time to find another place either to move that house or build another home. So we're trying to take some of the pressure off people to move through that quickly.

The Hon. WES FANG: Understood. Earlier in the year there was the announcement of tranche two—\$100 million of funding. A month ago the Premier committed that he would be going to the Commonwealth for additional funds for the Northern Rivers. The Federal member in the seat of Richmond has advised that the Federal Government has not received any formal request from the New South Wales State Government for the additional recovery support. Is it accurate that no attempt has occurred to secure further funding from the Commonwealth Government?

SIMON DRAPER: For my part—and I said this earlier in relation to the Central West, but it's also true of the Northern Rivers—we're almost constantly talking to the Commonwealth about additional rounds of funding for the Northern Rivers and other parts of New South Wales.

The Hon. WES FANG: Can you detail exactly how those conversations have occurred? What steps have you, the Labor Government and the Premier, who made the personal commitment, made in order to secure funding from the Commonwealth?

SIMON DRAPER: I won't speak for the elected officials. They appear at these hearings in their own right. But, for my part, as I said—

The Hon. WES FANG: But you must be aware of what they've done, right? They would keep you informed.

SIMON DRAPER: But, to be fair, Mr Fang, the Premier has appeared at these hearings. Minister Dib was here just a few hours ago. He could've been asked this question.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got plenty of questions. We might have to call him back. If you're suggesting that I've got to call him back, which it would seem you are doing, I'm happy to do that if you're not able to provide the answers.

SIMON DRAPER: Clearly that's not true. I was answering the question for my own part. I'm in regular contact, and so are my officials, talking to the officials from NEMA, the National Emergency Management Agency. That's the process by which we set up disaster funding. There are billions and billions of dollars being spent in New South Wales on disaster recovery and it all goes through the same process.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll come back to the question that I asked. In relation to your work seeking to get the funding from the Commonwealth, have you made any active approaches around securing money that the Premier committed to a month ago?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: How did that actually occur?

SIMON DRAPER: Like I said, speaking for my own part, I communicate with officials at a Commonwealth level and have put those propositions to them, both verbally and in writing.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you able to table those letters or provide copies of the letters?

SIMON DRAPER: I haven't sent them any letters.

The Hon. WES FANG: What has formally occurred in writing to secure funding?

SIMON DRAPER: I have certainly weekly, if not daily, contact with those officials talking about how we could fund further steps in the Northern Rivers. The Commonwealth Government is a co-funder of the Resilient Homes Program. We have reporting responsibilities to them. They're engaged regularly.

The Hon. WES FANG: What I'm trying to drill down is what are the steps that have happened? What are the steps that are required to have that funding commitment from the Commonwealth? What do you need to do to secure that funding?

SIMON DRAPER: There are different elements of the disaster recovery funding arrangements.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm talking about the money the Premier committed to the Northern Rivers that he was going to get from the Commonwealth. How do we do that?

SIMON DRAPER: The normal process is that the Premier would write to the Prime Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you know if he's done that?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, I do.

The Hon. WES FANG: What was the response?

SIMON DRAPER: I'm not aware of what the response has been from the Prime Minister at this stage. He doesn't write back to me.

The Hon. WES FANG: Who wrote the letter? Was it the Premier's Department? The Premier's office? The Premier himself? Did you write it? Did you send it to the Premier?

SIMON DRAPER: There would be a number of people involved in writing those letters, but certainly we would provide advice because we would be the ones talking to the Commonwealth officials about what the appropriate framework for that sort of program would be.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you send it to directly to the Prime Minister or is it sent to his office? What's the process from there?

SIMON DRAPER: Once we've had our input into the content of the letter, what happens after that is not really part of our role. We're not participating in that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you actually see the final letter before it was sent?

SIMON DRAPER: I've seen correspondence and proposals that we've had input into, yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you know how much they asked for or was it an open-ended letter? Did they ask for a specific amount for the Northern Rivers?

SIMON DRAPER: I think what the Government has announced is what the State Government has put into it, which is \$100 million for the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. WES FANG: Did you recommend to them that they ask for a certain figure?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't believe that we've proposed any figure. My advice to anyone who will listen to me is that—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm listening right now.

SIMON DRAPER: —we've got \$700 million to spend, we're a long way off having committed all of that money at this stage, and there's going to be a time when we're going to take stock and see how much of that money is left, along with the other \$100 million that's been committed by the State Government. At that point, that's a time when I think the Commonwealth will engage more actively about the money that's required to complete the work in the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. WES FANG: At the moment the Premier's out there saying that he's going to be securing money from the Federal Government. He sent a letter and as of yet we don't know what else he's done even though I've gone through step by step as to what happens in the process. There's no money coming from the Federal Government. The Premier has made a commitment but the Federal local member up there, who is also a member of the Labor Party, doesn't know anything about it. What's going on?

SIMON DRAPER: The orthodox approach is one party writes a letter, the other party responds.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, do we have a response? Are we pushing them? Are we holding them to account? Are we getting funding from them? The Premier said that that's what he is going to be doing and yet so far the Federal Government doesn't seem to know anything about it.

SIMON DRAPER: Mr Fang, the Premier sat in a hearing for four hours the other day. There was an opportunity to ask him those questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: We've got plenty of questions, though.

SIMON DRAPER: Minister Dib sat here for four hours today. There was an opportunity to ask him those questions as the Minister for Emergency Services. Minister Scully, who is another Minister responsible for our legislation, will be appearing at estimates on Friday for another four hours. That's 12 hours of question time to ask Ministers and Premiers those questions.

The Hon. WES FANG: Except it's not because we've got a lot of breaks in between and we have crossbenchers taking our time, but that's okay. Do you know when the letter was sent and was there a time line provided to the Prime Minister for a response?

SIMON DRAPER: I think my earlier answer kind of covers all this. We provide—

The Hon. WES FANG: Because there are families in the Northern Rivers that are relying on this response. Do you think \$800 million is enough to complete the tasks?

SIMON DRAPER: There are a couple of things there. First of all, I've explained already my earlier answer covers some of the things you said. Once the content of those letters leaves our hands, there are dealings between the Prime Minister and the Premier. We're not directly involved in that. In terms of the money that's available, as I've said earlier, there's quite a lot of money left in that fund. We don't know yet how much or if any will be left. But there's a long way to go before we get to that point. There's another \$100 million which is committed beyond that, so we're a long way from running out of money in the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. WES FANG: You'll be coming back to me very shortly.

The CHAIR: Order!

The Hon. WES FANG: If you could let me know when that letter was sent, that'd be great.

The CHAIR: It is now the crossbench members' time.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have a couple of follow-up questions on Youth Justice. Starting with the answer given previously about the failure to install the music and the computers in the youth centres—

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Failure?

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, the not having done so.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: No, can I—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Can I just say from the outset though that this is a program that has been advocated for for some time.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If we're talking iPads, the iPads have been, on the advice I have, made available through the six centres initially for the purpose of facilitating visits. Corrective Services, which is a separate area—but there were many learnings from the Corrective Services experience with iPads in terms of safety, security and a whole range of things. But through the COVID period similarly Youth Justice commenced using iPads. That work has continued for the purpose of visits. Youth Justice currently is in the early stages of looking at scoping a more comprehensive procurement and rollout of iPads, which would be comprehensive, as I understand it, for the entire system for each detainee—to each young person, I should say—to have an iPad.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: What is taking so long? I've seen some really good research on what it would cost, safe providers, how fast we could do that. What is actually taking us that time?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may respectfully challenge the proposition that it is taking too long, there are issues of getting the technological solution right. There are issues of training staff. There are issues of procurement. As I understand it, they are in place now, being utilised for the purpose of visits. I think the question of—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: It's more the rollout, the use that actually is the remedial, the therapeutic, the company, not the utility use—the use that young people get to have.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I may in a moment refer that question to one of my colleagues but, on the question of music, again, we have a range of music programs right through our six centres. The nature of music—it is a very personal thing. Musical taste and, indeed, the cultural aspects of music are quite rightly bespoke and we have a whole range of things happening through the centres. In terms of music, again, if there are gaps in the system or if there are improvements or indeed an appetite to know more, we're very happy to share that—but open to any advice. What I might do now is flick the iPad question because, as I understand it, we're scoping and—

SIMONE CZECH: We are.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: —systematically working to expand.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Do we have a time when we'll say, "Yep we've done it. The young people incarcerated have access"?

SIMONE CZECH: I will answer that question. But if I could just go back a little bit—

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes.

SIMONE CZECH: As I mentioned earlier—and Ms Neilson has mentioned it as well—Youth Justice has been going through a significant program of reform. We've had to prioritise that reform that's focused on safety for young people in detention as an absolute first priority. We've had to do that within a limited budget and, again, because safety is paramount, we've invested the money in those areas. Those reform initiatives—and if I use the example of the Lee Shearer review that happened back in 2019. From memory, I think there were 63 recommendations. I might have that wrong but we've completed all of those now, which has enabled us to move into other things like music and iPads in detention centres. As Mr Tidball mentioned, there are a range of music programs already in detention centres, not iPad based, but they are there. I have to say artists I've never heard of—someone called Nooky in one of the centres.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I think I've heard of them.

SIMONE CZECH: But really tailored to the local community, particularly as it relates to Aboriginal younger people but also Pasifika young people and making sure that we get their input into what they'd like to do. The programs are tailored in each centre depending on those local needs and feedback and the voice of young people. To answer your last question about when, it will be this financial year.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Great.

SIMONE CZECH: Like the secretary mentioned, we are in a scoping exercise at the moment. Obviously we need to understand logistics, costs and how we'll fund that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But we're looking at this financial year?

SIMONE CZECH: Of course.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you aware how many children received custodial sentences that were subject to the STMPs? Is that something you can take on notice?

SIMONE CZECH: We'd have to take that on notice.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I think we'll need to take that on notice.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry for the work but it is really important now, especially with the recent announcement. What is the explanation for the increase of the incarceration cost of a child? I think now it's \$800 more than at the last budget. I know there's an explanation with, I think, the less people you have, the more the cost or vice versa. What can we attribute the rising cost to?

SIMONE CZECH: The bulk of our costs in detention centres are staff related. Ms Neilson can expand on this answer, but there are certainly some increased costs with things like food and just costs of living, electricity et cetera. All of those things combined have led to that increase over the last few years. But I might ask Ms Neilson to expand on that.

CANDICE NEILSON: I think you've nailed it, Ms Czech, and I think, Ms Higginson, the answer was almost in your question. It is very much about the fixed costs and the reduction of the number of young people in custody over the last decade. There are some fixed costs that don't shift regardless of how many young people are in custody at any point in time. Because the report on government services calculates the average cost per young person per day simply on the basis of the total cost of the custodial system divided by the average number of young people in custody per day, that's largely what contributes to that increasing cost.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Draper, what is our understanding at the moment of how many tenants are facing end of tenancy through the buybacks, particularly in the regions?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't know if my one of my colleagues might have that exact number, but we do have a concern about tenants living in homes that are being bought back. We've put in place a number of policies earlier this year to try to give them some relief and protection and principally making it a condition of the buyback process that the owners of those properties provide—I think it's at least six months' notice to those tenants. We have had tenants who have been caught in a position where they face having to move out of those homes, even quite recently. We've put in place arrangements for them to be able to either move into other premises urgently or to stay in those homes even after the buyback has proceeded, even on a temporary basis, until they find accommodation. The last thing we want is for the buyback program to result in people becoming homeless.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Yes, it's a real issue, isn't it? How is the Resilient Land Program going and what do you expect in terms of having land available for people, particularly in the Lismore area?

SIMON DRAPER: I'm happy to kick it off, but I think Mr Hendicott, if you've got time, probably can give you a fuller answer. I think 15 sites have been identified and they are all advancing. One of the reasons I mentioned earlier that we want to slow down the rate and give people time is because getting those homes and home sites available and into the market is a much slower process than the buyback process itself. I might let Mr Hendicott expand on that.

KIERON HENDICOTT: We released the draft Resilient Lands Strategy back in June this year. That identified 15 land sites. Subsequent to the release we had that on consultation for a number of weeks. As part of the consultation, we've received another dozen land sites that we're assessing at the moment. As the engagement period is underway, we've been deep into technical and commercial due diligence on a range of those land sites. We're getting very close to be able to have secured some land on those, and we're hopeful over the next few months to better confirm a few of the actual land sites within the Lismore LGA.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I haven't had a close enough look—obviously I will—but is one of those the North Lismore Plateau? Is that part of that?

KIERON HENDICOTT: There were six land sites identified within the Lismore LGA. I won't comment on the specific details of those sites given we are in commercial-in-confidence negotiations with some of the proponents.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I'll see you at the Planning hearing.

The Hon. WES FANG: That sounds ominous!

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In the other one! I'm running out of time.

The Hon. WES FANG: At least I'm nice about it.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: No, Kieron knows I was being completely friendly. I meant we will finish the business then.

The CHAIR: Earlier I was asking questions about the "Try a Trade" program. I had another question for you to take on notice. I asked a question about the uptake or response to the program so far. But could I also ask you to take on notice how many women or girls have also taken up the program so far?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Happy to so do, Chair.

CANDICE NEILSON: Sorry, just to jump in, I've got the figure for Try a Trade now. It's 160 young people to date. The program for the young women is rolling out tomorrow at Reiby, so we'll be able to provide the numbers after the fact.

The CHAIR: Fantastic. I have some questions for Customer Service and Digital Government. When the Minister was here I was asking questions about the NSW Pet Registry and microchipping. I know that it is a joint project with the Office of Local Government, the Department of Customer Service, and Digital Government. I'm wondering if you could confirm what the role within that is for the Department of Customer Service and Digital Government, or whether it is being entirely run by OLG?

EMMA HOGAN: Yes, I can call on the Deputy Secretary of Digital NSW to answer. But we're providing support for that program through to its completion at the end of 2025.

LAURA CHRISTIE: Yes, Government Technology Platforms provides a service to the Office of Local Government, effectively building that Pet Registry on behalf of the Office of Local Government.

The CHAIR: Can I get an update on where your side of the work is up to in regards to that project?

LAURA CHRISTIE: Yes, sure. Throughout the last year we've been working on a closed MVP. We've been working with breeders and pet owners to understand the functionality and have been testing that with them. We have a road map for a future functionality for the Pet Registry. We're looking to roll that out over the next year and take that MVP to full-scale rollout early in 2024.

The CHAIR: I know that online retail and training platforms have led to a proliferation of the sale of dogs and cats from unregulated and dodgy breeders. Sites like Gumtree have been identified as key enablers for that. At the same time, all companion animals must be registered in New South Wales. I appreciate that the department's not responsible for Gumtree or Facebook Marketplace, but the only point for government to have any control in this space is with digital registration. Is that something that's going to be built into the Pet Registry, or is that something there have been requests for the department to work on?

LAURA CHRISTIE: I will have to take on notice any discussions that we've been having with those providers—Facebook or Gumtree, for example. But the purpose of the Pet Registry, of course, is to make it easier to register your pets, easier for that microchipping information to be input into the system by vets et cetera, and easier for those transfers of ownership to occur. But I will have to take on notice any discussions with Facebook, Gumtree or the like.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Mr Draper, this may be a question for your staff with the RA. I'm curious, if it's all right to discuss it, as to what support is being provided at the moment to the Aboriginal community at Cabbage Tree Island. I think we heard that the Reconstruction Authority has determined that it's not a safe place to return to or rebuild. What is the position there and what are we doing?

SIMON DRAPER: It's not so much that the Reconstruction Authority has determined that. Cabbage Tree Island, as you know very well, is managed by the land council there and we have to respect their decision-making processes. They have their own governance protocols around that. I understand Aboriginal Affairs and the New South Wales Government provided some support to the community there earlier this year to try to facilitate a discussion. I understand there are different views in the community about whether people should move back to the island or not. They did engage a consultant to provide some advice about that and they've got that advice now. It's not the Reconstruction Authority or the NRC telling people whether they should or shouldn't move back. We wouldn't do that, particularly to the Aboriginal Land Council. But I think it's a question of judging the level of risk involved in living on that island and having community assets there.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: But if the assumption is that the decision is to rebuild, is the Reconstruction Authority willing and able to provide schemes to assist in that rebuild or resilience build?

SIMON DRAPER: There are different parts of the disaster funding arrangements that might support elements of that. That doesn't normally cover the cost of rebuilding homes; it's usually focused on public infrastructure, in particular. There's a school involved in that as well. At the moment we haven't really made a judgement about what the Government may or may not fund pending the decision-making of the community itself.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is it fair to say, though, that there is a good, active relationship between the RA and the land council, as the land manager, and the community there as well?

SIMON DRAPER: I think that's probably partly a question that only they could answer. But the approach that we try to take is to be respectful of, firstly, the experience they have had: the trauma and the difficulties they've experienced having to move out of a community and a space that they've occupied for a very long time—the trauma that normally comes with those sorts of disasters—but also the importance of that place to the people who live there. We try to be respectful about that and allow them time to go through their own decision-making process, but we will provide support, in a way, when invited to do so.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: And they're fully aware that that invitation is open?

SIMON DRAPER: Again, I think only they could answer that. Mr Hendicott may have more detail about some of the engagement we've had.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Sorry, Mr Hendicott, you'd just sat down.

SIMON DRAPER: While he's doing that, he did give me a number: Our best estimate of the number of tenants—this is off topic—is between 200 and 250 tenants impacted by the Resilient Homes Program.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Gosh, that's quite a lot.

KIERON HENDICOTT: With respect to Cabbage Tree Island, we have been providing support to the land council through their assessment process. As Mr Draper mentioned, they procured some technical examinations of flood risk for the island. We also provided them the flood risk assessment that underpinned the homes program. Our results and results of the other independent assessment were corroborated. I understand, as Mr Draper said, decisions around the future of the community are a matter for the community and they have undertaken their existing process to ascertain that. We're supporting them as required as well as Aboriginal housing officers as well as Aboriginal Affairs.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: While you are there, Mr Hendicott, with the Resilient Land Program, and the 15 sites and now the extra dozen sites, are you also engaged with the Widjabul Wia-bal community about the cultural sensitivities and the appropriateness of those sites as well? Is that part of the due diligence?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Yes, absolutely. It's part of the due diligence of each individual site and subsequently we've been working with the Widjabul Wia-bal people as well as other Aboriginal communities to ascertain the degree of sensitivity there is around cultural heritage.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: In terms of doing that due diligence, are you getting the assistance—is it coming through the Planning department or does RA have specific allocated staff on that project? How is that working?

KIERON HENDICOTT: We've had some direct engagement with the Widjabul Wia-bal people on a few of the sites in the program. The other thing to probably note is that the objective of the Resilient Land Program is to accelerate the delivery of land. The best opportunity to do that is for land that already has some degree of development consent, ideally with developmental approval. If that development approval is in place, it follows that it's already gone through that process.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is it fair to say that most of the lands are in that category, or are we looking at rezonings or that sort of thing?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Most of the land we've identified in the short list and the other sites that we think are high priority sites are well progressed in the development pathway.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I know this is a silly question: Are they all well and truly above the probable maximum flood height?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Yes. One of the foundational principles of the Resilient Land Program is that we identified flood-free land. All the land that we've identified, the residential areas of those lands are above the probable maximum flood.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Is your definition of flood-free land over the PMF?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Over the PMF, yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I was just wondering, Mr Michael Tidball, the Premier recently said in the media about Long Bay prison, that it could be up for sale. I was wondering are there any Youth Justice Centres that are going to be closed in the next two years?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: No.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Good. That's comforting. I wondered, does the department, if the police were having an operation, say recently with operation regional Mongoose, do they let you know that something like that is happening so that you are prepared in terms of how you can do early intervention?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I might, if I may, refer that question to Ms Czech and Ms Neilson.

SIMONE CZECH: Across the State we have very collaborative relationships with a whole range of partners, including New South Wales police. It really depends on the circumstances and whether us having that level of detail may impact on any investigation or operation that they have underway. Specifically about operation Mongoose, I might have to refer to Ms Neilson about that because I just can't recall if we knew about that one.

CANDICE NEILSON: Sorry, I'm going to also have to take that on notice. I don't know if we knew about that ahead of time.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: If I may supplement my earlier response? I do. Clearly we have a large and very diverse State. I meet regularly with the police commissioner and the reality is that a number of these police operations, as well as place-based local problems that arise, mean that there needs to be very tight coordination between the police, ourselves, Health and Education. I would not say that we are necessarily given notice in advance of the time of activities such as Mongoose. Certainly, where there are learnings and we believe that we can more tightly coordinate, that absolutely does happen and clearly across the main players—and to my mind they are DCJ, with all of its activities that deal with vulnerability and crisis, the police, Health and Education. That is a discipline which we need to really constantly work at.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned before with the Shearer report that you've implemented all the recommendations. Is there now ongoing monitoring or analysis to ensure that the centres are safe for staff, youth, volunteers and anyone that interacts with the centres?

SIMONE CZECH: The short answer is yes. In relation to the recommendations from the Shearer report, some were to build a building, infrastructure-type recommendations, so we are obviously not tracking those. But there are others, such as the introduction of the high-risk panel. They are continuing and we monitor those. We have a range of oversight bodies, including the Inspector of Custodial Services, NSW Ombudsman, Official Community Visitors et cetera, that hold us to account against our policies and procedures, and obviously a whole range of internal review mechanisms to monitor how children are doing and making sure that when they come into detention, in particular, we get them out where it's in our control as quickly as possible. As we said earlier, they exit with a robust case plan, somewhere safe to live but ongoing services where they need them as well.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I was going to ask about that through care. In terms of their release, are we also talking to families and carers because often children are going back or youths, sorry, are going back into the same environment that they've come from. Have they built enough resistance or resilience so that they are not going to reoffend or the recidivism rate is there? What kind of contact is made with families and carers and people that should be aware?

SIMONE CZECH: It's a great question, and again, the short answer is absolutely, we have contact with significant people in that young person's life. One of the advantages of Youth Justice being in the broader Department of Communities and Justice, particularly with the child protection and out-of-home care parts of the department, is where we've got children or young people that are known to both systems, we are able to leverage the resources and the supports that are available for those young people. That's certainly been a benefit since we came together as DCJ. Upon exit planning for children, where we can, we absolutely talk to anyone that is important in that child's life and the child or the young person themselves in particular. But it's an important part of what we do.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: One of the things that strikes me when I visit these centres is to observe the meetings that happen with staff on setting goals weekly for these young people, and the key thing: wraparound supports, casework with family and kin and others, obviously crucial, but the vital element during the period of the detention order is to be taking that young person down a pathway of goal setting and reviewing that weekly so that they become engaged with that plan for post their release.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And does that include access to ID? Because often times they wouldn't have birth certificates, so preparing them for getting back into education or work or those kinds of things and even opening a bank account.

CANDICE NEILSON: Yes. I can touch on that if you like. One of the programs that we fund statewide is our casework support program, which is a program designed to help make young people make that transition from a period of supervision back into the community. As part of that program, at the start the young person will sit down with their caseworker and they'll identify a whole range of goals. They're those what I'd call

bread-and-butter goals, the foundation goals. They're things like, does this young person have a birth certificate? Does this person have ID? Are they connected with Centrelink? Are we getting them back into employment or education? Do they have somewhere to live? All those really foundational pieces.

The other thing I would say is, several years ago we started an initiative with Births, Deaths and Marriages to provide free birth certificates for young people in contact with Youth Justice because so many of them—or some of them—have never had access to their birth certificate or they've lost them over the course of their life. We have some data that I can provide on notice about the number of people that we've connected with birth certificates.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That would be great. Is that same service offered to youth on remand? You never know how long they're going to be there.

CANDICE NEILSON: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: It is offered?

CANDICE NEILSON: The birth certificate program is offered to all young people in contact with our service system. Some time ago we also opened it up to young people in contact with our Youth on Track funded service provider, which is a really early intervention program. So the short answer is yes. Whoever we can give a birth certificate to, we will, because we know it's such a critical part of participating in community.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Just turning now to the bail assistance line. It may have changed its name. Do you know how often that is used or the police are able to access that, or is that not in your area?

CANDICE NEILSON: That is in our area. It has renamed itself to the Bail Accommodation and Support Service, yes, you are correct.⁶ There is probably data in this pack somewhere that speaks to utilisation rates, but I can certainly provide detail of that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Draper, did you happen to find out when the letter was sent to the Prime Minister?

SIMON DRAPER: No, I didn't.

The Hon. WES FANG: If you could let me know perhaps or ask the Premier's office if he might be able to provide a date?

SIMON DRAPER: The reason I said that earlier is a question about what ministers have done and when they've done them et cetera are better put to the ministers, I think.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll put it in writing. We had plenty of questions and the poor Minister was feeling a bit flustered this afternoon. The Resilient Land Program—the draft Northern Rivers Resilient Lands Strategy identified 22 sites across the Northern Rivers as potential sites. However, only 15 have moved to on-ground investigation. Why is that?

SIMON DRAPER: As Mr Hendicott was saying earlier, they have prioritised those that have the most prospect to move quicker. There's a number of criteria. They had to evaluate which of those sites, firstly, are flood-free, fire-free and meet a number of other criteria, but also the readiness to move ahead quickly and deliver affordable sites for new homes. That's the reason why. I should say, that's not the only thing happening in the Northern Rivers in terms of creating new home sites. We've also been working with councils. A number of councils say they've got a number of places where they believe new homes could be built. We've encouraged them and offered to work with them to get those to market and get them moving as new homes as soon as possible. The Resilient Homes Program is just one of many initiatives in the Northern Rivers.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you able to detail or provide to us what an on-ground investigation requires and in detail what the steps are for that? Could you provide that on notice?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't think we need to do it on notice. I'll get started, but we'll get Mr Hendicott up again. He's been deeply involved in this. In fact, let's just let him explain it.

KIERON HENDICOTT: If you can just repeat the question for me please?

The Hon. WES FANG: The on-ground investigation, what does it detail?

⁶ In [correspondence](#) to the committee received 27 November 2023, Ms Candice Neilson, Acting Executive Director, Youth Justice NSW, clarified the evidence given.

KIERON HENDICOTT: In terms of assessing the individual land sites under the Resilient Land Program, it was a two-step process. The first stage looked through around 200 individual datasets on each individual property to ascertain the degree that it was development ready, the degree that it was development suitable, and basically understand—as Mr Draper said—whether there are key constraints such as natural hazard risks, biodiversity conservation and significant agriculture land. That was ostensibly a filtering process to get to a shortlist of land. From the 322 individual applications that went through the expressions of interest process, we looked at each individual one of those. We landed on a shortlist of around about 30 or so sites. We then worked through a separate and more detailed investigation process where we set up an expert independent panel to review each of those 30 sites, as well as set up a community reference panel to understand—

The Hon. WES FANG: And we got to 22? And then we're now to 15?

KIERON HENDICOTT: That's right. Then we're down to 15. The distinction between the 15 and the 22 was really around its development readiness. The residual sites in—

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm just going to redirect now because I'm not worried about the sites that were discarded. When's the earliest we'll be able to build on those 15 sites that are actually under investigation now?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Again, we're working with the individual landholders of those 15 sites to get to a point where we've secured the land. Those negotiations are underway. There's a range of technical and commercial due diligence around that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is it only the negotiations that are holding it up?

KIERON HENDICOTT: No. There's not just negotiations underway. There's, again, a range of technical work that needs to be done. Once a development consent, for example, is achieved, there's a lot of extra work that is needed before you can actually develop the site—a range of engineering studies, a range of procurement and tender elements.

The Hon. WES FANG: Sounds like a long process, Mr Hendicott.

KIERON HENDICOTT: It takes time, yes. That's correct.

The Hon. WES FANG: What do you say to Northern Rivers residents who say that the process is taking far too long?

SIMON DRAPER: Can I just reiterate what I said earlier, that the discussions we've had with Northern Rivers residents who are subject to these programs—a lot of very direct feedback in community meetings that we've had is that they would like more time. It's not a case of them wanting to rush to a new site. They need time to consider their options. That's what we've undertaken to give them. We've put in place a number and are doing more initiatives to make sure they've got the time to do that.

The Hon. WES FANG: How's the \$100 million being spent?

SIMON DRAPER: It hasn't been expended at the moment, but it's being spent on the initiatives that Mr Hendicott's described. Those two statements that I've made are not inconsistent. One is that the money is being spent to develop new home sites. The other comment is that the people who may be the beneficiaries of those new home sites are being given extra time to consider their options as those home sites are developed.

The Hon. WES FANG: If you look at the \$100 million—it equates to only about \$10,000 per block if you've got 10,000 homes that need to be redeveloped. Is that enough money, do you think, for that process?

KIERON HENDICOTT: In terms of the utilisation of that \$100 million, there's a range of ways that we're looking to deploy that capital to accelerate development in the region. One of those ways is more a pure-play acquisition and development process. That's one avenue. That's a quite capially intensive and slower process.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you have a year that people might be able to move into any one of these 15 sites?

KIERON HENDICOTT: We're anticipating that we'll be able to secure land over the next few months and hopeful that the construction of the home sites will commence in 2024.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you think people will be able to have Christmas in their homes on any one of those 15 sites by the end of 2024, by the end of next year?

KIERON HENDICOTT: There's a range of sites, as I said earlier, that are in a range of stages. Some of them are quite well advanced. Some of them require less work to actually deliver.

The Hon. WES FANG: So 2024 Christmas should be looking good for Northern Rivers residents? Can we say that?

KIERON HENDICOTT: Aiming for advance of that.

SIMON DRAPER: I should say I think it's been great folly in putting unrealistic time frames on some of these things. That hasn't helped people in the Northern Rivers, to make undertakings about the scales of programs or the timetables it can be delivered in.

The Hon. WES FANG: But neither's had no land.

SIMON DRAPER: These are people who've been through a traumatic experience. The last thing they need is for government officials or members of Parliament or anyone else setting timetables or targets which cannot be achieved and they feel let down again. So we're very cautious and realistic about doing that.

The Hon. WES FANG: Mr Draper, I would suggest that the last thing they need is to have another Christmas away from home. I think that 2024 should be achievable, shouldn't it?

SIMON DRAPER: My point earlier, Mr Fang, was that we're not trying to get people out of their homes. Where people are in homes, their homes are being bought back. We're trying to give them as much time in their current home and not forcing them out of those homes. We're giving them time by giving them very extended—

The Hon. WES FANG: Is 2024 unrealistic?

SIMON DRAPER: People make their own determination on how long it takes them to reorganise your life. It's hard enough buying a home or building a new home at the best of times.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is it realistic?

SIMON DRAPER: Doing it after a major flood, when you've been through a traumatic experience, is even more difficult.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, I understand that. But they also want—

SIMON DRAPER: As an example of that I will tell you that in southern New South Wales, where the fires hit four years ago, only 25 per cent of those homes have been re-established when I visited there earlier this year.

The Hon. WES FANG: I know. I was there.

SIMON DRAPER: People need a lot of time for that.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that. But they also want some land to build some homes. The Parliamentary Secretary for flood recovery compared the communication of the program to an episode of *Utopia*. Do you agree with that assessment?

SIMON DRAPER: I like *Utopia*.

The Hon. WES FANG: I bet you do, Mr Draper. I'm not sure I'd like to see it in government. But it's a great TV show.

SIMON DRAPER: The thing I like about it is that Tony, who's the CEO, is one of the most sensible characters in the show. I like that about it.

The Hon. WES FANG: I would also note that it's fiction.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Start calling him "Simon".

The Hon. WES FANG: All jokes aside, when you've got the Labor Parliamentary Secretary comparing the way that the Government is approaching this issue to a comedy show, you've got to start worrying about the residents of the Northern Rivers. And, I might add, that the Minister isn't very sensible in that show. If we are drawing parallels, I might seek your opinion on that as well.

SIMON DRAPER: I will say we have a lot of engagement with the Parliamentary Secretary, or the member for Lismore.

The Hon. WES FANG: I bet you do. She's quite critical.

SIMON DRAPER: We have a really good working relationship with her. We take her advice. I mentioned earlier that there is a community leaders forum in the Northern Rivers, which we helped establish. The Parliamentary Secretary is the chair of that community leaders forum. We find that a very productive forum for getting guidance on the direction of those programs.

The Hon. WES FANG: Before I move to the pod villages, I just need to know, when did you send advice to the Premier re the letter for the PM?

SIMON DRAPER: Beg your pardon?

The Hon. WES FANG: When did you send advice to the Premier's office re the letter that he was going to send to the PM? I imagine you would have sent advice to the Premier, what he needed to ask for. Do you know when you sent that advice to the Premier's office?

SIMON DRAPER: No. The way that that works is that that sort of stuff goes to Cabinet. As you know, I can't comment on matters that go to Cabinet.

The Hon. WES FANG: I've got to say, I've asked—I don't know how many times—when the letter was sent to the Prime Minister and when you sent advice to the Premier's office. I've never seen such an issue be completely glossed over and not answered.

SIMON DRAPER: It's not glossed over. There are two things that I've said.

The Hon. WES FANG: You must know roughly when you sent something?

SIMON DRAPER: One is that if you want to find out a Minister or a Premier does, you should ask the Minister or the Premier.

The Hon. WES FANG: Six months? Six weeks? What are we talking about?

SIMON DRAPER: If you want to know what we've done, I can tell you, but I can't tell you things that have gone to Cabinet. You know there's an established convention around that.

The Hon. WES FANG: When did you send advice about what to ask for?

SIMON DRAPER: Our advice to the Cabinet and to the Premier is Cabinet-in-confidence. That was the mechanism, because it's a funding—

The Hon. WES FANG: We might have to challenge that, and we'll see how we go.

SIMON DRAPER: It is a funding question that goes to Cabinet.

The Hon. WES FANG: I want to get to the pod villages. How many people are living in the pod villages? How many are children, do you know?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have that figure with me. Do you have that number?

KIERON HENDICOTT: I will just look it up, if you can bear with me.

SIMON DRAPER: Mr Hendicott might look that up for you.

The Hon. WES FANG: How many people are being housed out of their own home town or region? Before my time runs out, can you also provide if there are issues of violence or of concern that are occurring in these pod villages? Is this only for flood victims, or do you see this as an opportunity to be rolled out for other people that are at risk of being able to access housing? What's your plan to actually transition people out of pod villages and what support are you providing them?

SIMON DRAPER: I take it that you don't want us to try to answer those now?

The Hon. WES FANG: If I've got any more time left, I'll come back to it. I just wanted to get those on the record. If we're not able to get back to it, I'm sure you'll take it on notice, Mr Draper, because just like in *Utopia*, you're a pretty diligent sort of a bloke.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I have one more question, Mr Tidball. I think it might be something to take on notice. It relates to the previous question taken on notice. Could you please get me the figure of how many of the 212 young people currently in custody were subject to any suspect target management plan?

MICHAEL TIDBALL: I'll attempt to provide that.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Thank you.

MICHAEL TIDBALL: Can I just say up-front, I don't know that we'll be able to capture that, but we'll do what we can.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I bet you can. Thank you.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do we have more time?

The CHAIR: Time goes back to the Opposition now. You've got about 25 minutes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Wonderful.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: Are you taking my time, Wes?

The Hon. WES FANG: Can I? Thank you, Sue. You're the best. I'm doing Northern Rivers stuff.

Ms SUE HIGGINSON: I hear. I'm watching all of it.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are you? I'm not getting answers, though. It must be frustrating you as well. I will just come back to the pod village questions. We were talking about the number of people living in the pod villages. Are we able to get some answers there?

SIMON DRAPER: There are about 1,000 residents living in the temporary pod villages at the moment.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you know how many are housed in or out of their own home region or villages?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have that to hand. We probably can get that. We might have to take that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: No worries. I will let you do that.

SIMON DRAPER: It's part of the rules of the Committee.

The Hon. WES FANG: Yes, I appreciate that. Do you know the number of children out of that thousand?

SIMON DRAPER: I didn't get the number since you asked the question a moment ago, I'm sorry. We can provide that on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: You don't have the answer?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have it with me. But just so you understand, those pod villages are managed by community housing providers. They have a lot more information about the residents in those villages than we would have here today.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to that, what's the process for dealing with any issues that might come up, like violence, harassment et cetera? You obviously have people living in those villages that are displaced and sometimes people who are displaced have issues of violence or behavioural issues. How are you managing that and monitoring those concerns?

SIMON DRAPER: It's a really genuine issue that you raise. It's all the usual methods—the community organisations and the police are involved, depending on the severity of the matter. But, as I said, the villages are managed by community housing providers. There's an agreement with each of the residents in there, and that includes the types of behaviours that are acceptable in those villages. From time to time there have been cases where people have to be asked to move out from those villages because of their conduct. There have been more severe matters where the police have had to be involved, so that's managed in the normal course of police work.

The Hon. WES FANG: How are you providing safety for vulnerable people that are in those pod villages, like women, children et cetera? Are they provided additional security or additional services to make sure that they're kept safe in those locations?

SIMON DRAPER: My understanding is that the housing providers who are managing that process would make an assessment of the vulnerability or how at risk any individuals are. That's not necessarily to do just with the circumstances in the village itself but their lives prior to moving in. Otherwise, if there are imminent risks, the usual practices for policing and providing security are there. There are, from time to time, security services provided at those villages in addition to the police services.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do those providers have KPIs that they have to meet? Do they have standards that you're monitoring? How are you keeping an eye on their work and making sure that they're keeping the residents there safe?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, there are funding arrangements in place, is the usual course of things, and we have teams—

The Hon. WES FANG: So it's a financial penalty that they face if things occur in those villages?

SIMON DRAPER: No, it's an operating agreement. There's an agreement in place with those community housing providers and they have a number of requirements they have to meet under the arrangements.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm just going to turn back now to the long-vexed question of the letter that went to the Prime Minister. I'm advised that while Cabinet submissions may be confidential, timings aren't necessarily so. Are you able to provide some guidance around the timings as to when those things occurred, noting that there is a lot of interest in the issue and the Premier has made some strong commitments? We're doing our job by making sure that these things are in train and we are not just being provided lip service by the Premier.

SIMON DRAPER: The timing of—what are you asking?

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll go back. When did you provide advice to the Premier's Office around the content of the letter that he was going to send to the Prime Minister? Do you know when the final letter was sent to the Prime Minister requesting Commonwealth funding for the Northern Rivers, as the Premier outlined?

SIMON DRAPER: I can give you somewhat of an answer; it may not be as precise as you'd like.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'll take any answer at the moment, Mr Draper. I've been asking for quite awhile.

SIMON DRAPER: I'm trying to answer your questions as best as I can. The provisions that were used to fund the announcements for the Northern Rivers and for the Central West were both included in the State budget, and I believe the State budget was released on 19 September. Our advice to the Government was prior to the State budget, so it would have been in September. As to the letters, I've explained earlier: Once letters are going back and forth between Prime Ministers and Premiers and other Ministers, we don't have visibility of that, so I can't answer that question for you. But you can certainly ask the Premier or the Minister that.

The Hon. WES FANG: I appreciate that. The Premier made a commitment a month ago that this was going to happen and now we're trying to tease out what was provided by way of communication to the Prime Minister.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Point of order: The member has asked a question, which was directly answered. The answer was that it is not available because it is Cabinet-in-confidence, and they are not privy to the dates. The question has been answered. I don't understand what the honourable member is trying to do.

The CHAIR: I do think the member has asked many questions around this.

The Hon. WES FANG: And is not getting many answers, Chair.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: You've got an answer.

The CHAIR: I think the answer has been quite clear in regard to the information that is available.

The Hon. WES FANG: All right, I'll move on. The *Hansard* will show that I've tried. Who is responsible for maintaining the lands and homes that are purchased in the Resilient Homes Program?

SIMON DRAPER: Once the home is purchased it becomes, obviously, the property of the State Government. The future uses of those sites will be determined over time, probably with councils and other authorities in those areas. It depends a little bit on the tracts of land that become available to us. The intention is that those sites are removed from being used for residential uses in the future. That is the whole reason for buying them back.

The Hon. WES FANG: Which agency has carriage of that?

SIMON DRAPER: It has been the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation.

The Hon. WES FANG: What is the budget for the maintenance, do you know?

SIMON DRAPER: It is not so much a budget for the maintenance because we're not proposing to maintain them as homes.

The Hon. WES FANG: I imagine then that they're just left vacant. Does that not perhaps pose a risk of squatting or a risk of additional—

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, that is quite an understandable concern. Nothing has been done at this scale like this before. One of the pieces of guidance we have received back from the community and community leaders is the strong desire for those homes, if possible, to be relocated to new sites. But to your earlier point, that is not possible until people have secured and identified new places. Some people are doing that individually.

The Hon. WES FANG: There is a method to my questioning, Mr Draper.

SIMON DRAPER: Some people have been able to identify places. To the degree possible, we'll protect those homes from any further damage, and the owners of those homes may be able to relocate them when they get a new home site.

The Hon. WES FANG: So the Northern Rivers Reconstruction Corporation, does it own the land? Who owns it? Does it belong to the Government and it's managed by—

SIMON DRAPER: I believe that freehold title transfers to the NRC. Yes, that's correct.

The Hon. WES FANG: I want to move to the Reconstruction Authority Advisory Board. How many members are on there?

SIMON DRAPER: I think the Act provides for seven members.

The Hon. WES FANG: Are there any vacancies?

SIMON DRAPER: There are vacancies at present. There are currently four people on the board.

The Hon. WES FANG: Why are there still vacancies?

SIMON DRAPER: At the time, when I was appointed and the board members were appointed, the prior Government appointed only four members, I believe. So that left two vacancies for the State to appoint and two for the Commonwealth to appoint. We've been going through a process of asking the Commonwealth for its nominations because the Act provides for the Commonwealth to nominate two members of the board as well. I understand those nominations are coming through. It is going through the process of probity checks and all the things that happen before that recommendation is made to the Governor to make those appointments.

The Hon. WES FANG: Who is dragging the chain here? The Commonwealth?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't know if anyone is dragging the chain. I wouldn't characterise it that way.

The Hon. WES FANG: Well, we've got vacancies.

SIMON DRAPER: I wouldn't characterise it that way, but there are four positions which are currently being filled.

The Hon. WES FANG: The vacancies have to be filled within how much time? Do you know, Mr Draper?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't know if there is a time limit, but the board can't meet formally until all the vacancies are filled.

The Hon. WES FANG: I believe the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act says they must be filled within three months.

SIMON DRAPER: I'll just check this. I believe there is a reference to the Commonwealth having to make its recommendations within three months and, if it doesn't, then the State can make its own appointments.

The Hon. WES FANG: Have we asked them?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, we have asked them.

The Hon. WES FANG: What have they said?

SIMON DRAPER: They have provided some recommendations for appointments.

The Hon. WES FANG: How come they haven't been appointed?

SIMON DRAPER: As I said a moment ago, they've made nominations. There's a process—

The Hon. WES FANG: When did they make the nominations?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have that date. It wasn't that long ago. It was probably a couple of months ago, at the most.

The Hon. WES FANG: Does it take months to check out their bona fides?

SIMON DRAPER: What happens is people make nominations for someone to go on the board. They then have to confirm that the person actually is willing to go on the board. There's a process of going through and doing probity checks and all the rest of it.

The Hon. WES FANG: So they've been nominated without asking if they want to actually do it?

SIMON DRAPER: They would be proposed.

The Hon. WES FANG: That's a new one.

SIMON DRAPER: It's not unusual for someone to be proposed and then for us to go through a process of having to check whether that person is willing to serve on the board. That makes perfect sense.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you have a date of when the Commonwealth made their recommendations as to who they wanted to fill the positions on the board?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have that with me, but I'm sure we could find out for you.

The Hon. WES FANG: You'll take that on notice?

SIMON DRAPER: Sure.

The Hon. WES FANG: Excellent. Did you say there were four vacancies? I thought you said three at first, and then I thought you said there was four.

SIMON DRAPER: Sorry, I'm pretty sure it's four vacancies. Yes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Four vacancies. We've got the three people who the New South Wales Government has appointed, not four, I think you said earlier.

SIMON DRAPER: Sorry, I'll explain that. The Government, at the time, did appoint four people. One of those members subsequently decided to resign from the board.

The Hon. WES FANG: Do you know when that was?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't have the exact date. Again, that was probably a few months ago.

The Hon. WES FANG: What have we done about replacing that person?

SIMON DRAPER: They've got nominations to replace both that person and the vacancies that existed prior to—

The Hon. WES FANG: Who makes that decision?

SIMON DRAPER: Which decision?

The Hon. WES FANG: As to who goes on the board.

SIMON DRAPER: The decision on nominations for the board are made by the relevant Ministers, and they're ultimately appointed by the Governor.

The Hon. WES FANG: What have the Ministers done in relation to making sure these important positions are filled ASAP so that the board can meet and get the work started?

SIMON DRAPER: My understanding is that the Ministers have made nominations, including those proposed by the Commonwealth, and that the process I described earlier that they're going through is happening. The normal process for board appointments, not just for us but for anybody in government, is that those proposals are then taken to Cabinet, they're confirmed and then they go to the Executive Council and the Governor makes an appointment.

The Hon. WES FANG: That was months ago.

SIMON DRAPER: I didn't say that was months ago. No, I said—

The Hon. WES FANG: The Commonwealth put their people forward months ago, you said.

SIMON DRAPER: I said I'd check the date for you. I took it on notice.

The Hon. WES FANG: So it wasn't months ago. Did they—

SIMON DRAPER: No, you asked me what date they were proposed. I said I would take it on notice. That's my answer.

The Hon. WES FANG: The previous Government allocated four people to the board. One person has resigned. This is a very important board, on which the people of New South Wales are relying to have work started and to have the oversight provided on these important projects that are impacting on people's lives. So far, the Government has lost more board members than they've appointed. Isn't that correct?

SIMON DRAPER: First of all, just to make it clear, the purpose of the board is as an advisory board. It's not a governing board, just to clarify.

The Hon. WES FANG: Does that make a difference, Mr Draper?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes, it does. You said they oversight it. They don't oversight it. They provide advice to me, as the CEO, and to the Minister.

The Hon. WES FANG: So they're not important. Is that—

SIMON DRAPER: The Reconstruction Authority's activities have not been waiting for these board appointments to happen. We have been implementing all of the programs—the ones that we've been talking about today. We are working hard on the State disaster mitigation plans and the disaster adaptation plans. We're doing recovery in all these places. We're providing advice to the Government. As you said, all of these things have been happening. The fact that the board hasn't met or been fully appointed hasn't held it up. We have been working directly with the chair of the board and with other members of the board when seeking advice. That has been most productive.

The Hon. WES FANG: You've just answered the next question that I was about to ask, which is how many times has the board met? Zero.

SIMON DRAPER: As I said, the board can't meet until—

The Hon. WES FANG: A duck egg. Zero. Nothing. Nada.

SIMON DRAPER: I said earlier that, under the legislation, the board can't meet until all of the members are appointed.

The Hon. WES FANG: In that instance, given that the previous Government had started the process, why is this Government taking so damn long to appoint people so that this board can start providing advice to you and advocating for the projects that need to be advocated for? Have you got any idea?

SIMON DRAPER: No, I'm sort of taking that as a rhetorical point.

The Hon. WES FANG: No, it's a genuine question. I'm just not sure I'm going to get a genuine answer.

SIMON DRAPER: Maybe it's one of those questions that I can't answer. As I said earlier, the appointments under this process are made by Ministers and then ultimately appointed by the Governor.

The Hon. WES FANG: Have you spoken to the Ministers responsible and said, "Hey, guys. We need to get on this. This has been going on for way too long"?

SIMON DRAPER: That's not my normal manner of speaking to a Minister, no.

The Hon. WES FANG: I'm a bit colloquial, I guess.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: We know, Wes.

The Hon. WES FANG: Thank you. But, in all seriousness, have you tried to progress this issue to get some movement on it, given that the previous Government had done its due diligence and at least appointed four people? This Government has lost more board members than it has appointed.

SIMON DRAPER: We have done work. We've provided Ministers and worked with the Commonwealth to come up with nominations and proposals. One of the things we have to make sure we do is there is some recent legislation that has gone through Parliament that has particular requirements for members of the boards, and we're having to make sure we can accommodate that. The work of the Reconstruction Authority has continued unhindered while that process has been going on.

The Hon. WES FANG: Of the two Ministers, who is dragging the chain here on having these people appointed?

SIMON DRAPER: Well, I've already said that I don't characterise it that way.

The Hon. WES FANG: Okay. Which of the two Ministers hasn't followed the process in getting these people appointed?

SIMON DRAPER: The process of making appointments to the board—there are two Ministers who—

The Hon. WES FANG: Or is it the Premier? Are you saying that it's the Premier who is dragging the chain here?

SIMON DRAPER: I don't know why you're trying to put words in my mouth. I'm more than happy to answer your questions if you ask a question, but if you want to answer your own questions then there's probably no reason for me to sit here.

The Hon. WES FANG: I just don't understand. Who is the main Minister who you report to?

SIMON DRAPER: I was about to explain. We have an Act called the NSW Reconstruction Authority Act. There are two Ministers with responsibilities under the allocation of Acts for that legislation. One of them is Minister Scully, the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, and the other is Minister Dib, the Minister for Emergency Services. Both Ministers jointly administer that Act, with the exception of some divisions which relate

only to planning matters, and Minister Scully has sole responsibility for that section of the legislation. But both Ministers must propose board members.

The Hon. WES FANG: Is it the fact then that having two Ministers having oversight on this issue is slowing you down? Is that the problem?

SIMON DRAPER: That was the same arrangement as in the previous Government. Under the previous Government, when legislation was passed and administered, we had two Ministers—the planning Minister and the emergency services Minister—and there were the same arrangements. That arrangement is still in place now. We find it works perfectly well. It worked perfectly well with the Ministers in the previous Government and it works perfectly fine with the Ministers in this Government.

The Hon. WES FANG: It doesn't sound like the previous Government had an issue, though, appointing people to the board. It sounds like this Government does.

SIMON DRAPER: They appointed four out of seven, that's true.

The Hon. WES FANG: What steps has the Reconstruction Authority taken in regards to preparation for drought support and preparations for bushfire recovery?

SIMON DRAPER: They are two separate things. Drought is actually not one of the items for which the Reconstruction Authority has responsibility under its legislation. That's not to say that we wouldn't get involved in that process. I am very concerned that parts of the State are already moving into drought. It's a much more slow-moving event than floods, fires and storms, which we otherwise deal with. In terms of fires, our recovery process post-fires is very similar to our recovery process post-floods. It's setting up temporary accommodation—

The Hon. WES FANG: Slowly. Is that what you're saying?

SIMON DRAPER: No. Sometimes, as I said earlier, slowly is the right way to go with recovery. People take a long time to recover. One of the big lessons we've learned from a lot of these experiences is that by rushing the process of recovery and making undertakings to people that can't be fulfilled, you make their experience much worse than it would otherwise be.

The Hon. WES FANG: I hear that but, again, being an advocate for the people of the Northern Rivers, seeing as there doesn't seem to be one here—I note that Ms Sue Higginson isn't here at the moment—somebody needs to be an advocate for them. We've got a board that should be their advocacy and providing advice to you, but you've lost more members than you've appointed—not you, but the Government. Who is fighting for these people?

SIMON DRAPER: We're in the process of building up the Reconstruction Authority. It's a much larger organisation than had existed before. To the credit of the Parliament, it passed legislation last year to create the Reconstruction Authority. To the credit of the previous Government, they started the process. To the credit of the current Government, they've funded the Reconstruction Authority with a very significant amount of money. In an environment where there is otherwise a lot of fiscal pressure, the Reconstruction Authority has received another \$115 million over the forward estimates period to build up the organisation.

There's been a commitment of additional moneys for recovery in the Central West and the Northern Rivers. We've been discussing those earlier today. I mentioned that we're very, very engaged with community leaders in the Northern Rivers. That's something that has only commenced in the last three or four months. I think it was a much-needed change. That doesn't mean that there aren't many, many issues to still deal with there, but one of the things that we've learnt and we are putting in place is to ensure that we take our guidance from community leaders. We'll also be doing that in the Central West, as we discussed earlier today.

The Hon. WES FANG: I noted when I put the questions to you around the work that's been done around drought support and recovery and bushfire recovery, you said that they were two separate issues. But the learnings that we've had over the past few years is that, after a period of a lot of heavy rain and a lot of seasons of wet, all of a sudden when you have a drought what you end up with is a lot of fuel load and issue on the ground, which then creates issues around bushfires into the future. I think that's what we're potentially facing in this summer coming forward. What work have you done around bushfire recovery, given that it's likely that, by going into drought and having a number of seasons of high moisture, there's going to be a lot of growth on the ground, which is then going to turn very dry and become fuel load? Surely you must be doing some work around bushfire recovery?

SIMON DRAPER: Just to go back to your original point, the climatic conditions that precipitate drought—you're quite right—can also lead to fires. That's what happened, if you remember, in 2019. There was a period of long drought that led into that bushfire season. Recovery is something that happens after disasters, but

I think what you're referring to really is the preparedness and the prevention work that's been happening, and the commissioner for RFS has been here earlier today talking about some of that. For the most part, when it comes to bushfires, that prevention relates to land use planning, land management, hazard burning and building standards. They're our best tools. They are the things that have been put in place.

The Hon. WES FANG: In relation to the reconstruction efforts, what are you doing to ameliorate the problem before it even starts or to make sure that problems that come after a reconstruction aren't going to impact into the future? Surely you must be doing some work on that now?

SIMON DRAPER: Yes. We're developing a State disaster mitigation plan. Fire is one of the hazards in that State disaster mitigation plan that we cover. It's obviously one of the bigger hazards in Australia. What flows out of that is then a number of place-based disaster adaptation plans, which are much more applied. We work with councils and local communities to develop those. They will vary from place to place and hazard to hazard, but that's the process we've put in place. But there are a number of regimes already in place for mitigating the impacts of fires. They go to building standards, land use controls and land management practices, and then there is community preparedness that the Minister was talking earlier about—the Get Ready campaigns. To your question earlier, we have been revising our recovery plan, which more comes into effect after disasters, and that's something we'll be taking to the State Emergency Management Committee in the near future.

The Hon. WES FANG: My colleague has some quick questions. If you could take on notice how many homes have been lost in 2023 so far to bushfire, I'd appreciate that.

SIMON DRAPER: Happy to do that.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: My questions are about digital ID. I'm just wondering if you can provide an update on digital ID in the short time we have.

EMMA HOGAN: Sure. Mr Wells, do you want to take the floor?

GREG WELLS: We see this as a really important initiative, as does the Minister. We've been working this year, after a number of technical pilots earlier last year and through the course of that time frame, to procure platforms that will make this sustainable for us into the future. They're platforms to enable both the digital identity side of this—so biometric matching and those things that are important to make sure we can bind identity to foundational sources—as well as platforms to support the sharing of credentials. We see both of those things as foundational to what we want to do. We have got some pilots that are imminent for all of the programs of work, so we're working on those at the moment.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you have a time line? When do you think we'd see results from that pilot?

GREG WELLS: There are some pilots planned for—there is one particularly this year that we're in the final stages of doing various user acceptance and security testing on. So there's one this year and a couple early next year as well.

The CHAIR: Are there any questions that were taken on notice that anybody wants to put on record now this afternoon?

CANDICE NEILSON: Just one figure in relation to the Bail and Accommodation Support Service that you asked for—in the 2022-23 financial year, there were 110 young people placed through that program.

The CHAIR: Does the Government have any questions? No.

EMMA HOGAN: Chair, before you close, this is my second last estimates before I finish as secretary at the end of November. I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank all of our teams on record for all the work they've done across Minister Dib's portfolio and the former Minister during my time as secretary.

The CHAIR: Thank you to everybody who came today—all government officers for your attendance and your time today. The secretariat will be in touch in the near future regarding any questions that may have been taken on notice or any further supplementary questions. Thank you all again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.