

PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 1 – PREMIER AND FINANCE

Monday, 1 March 2021

Examination of proposed expenditure for the portfolio area

THE LEGISLATURE

CORRECTED

The Committee met at 9:30

MEMBERS

The Hon. Robert Borsak (Deputy Chair)

PRESENT

Ms Abigail Boyd
The Hon. Mark Buttigieg
The Hon. Ben Franklin
The Hon. Taylor Martin
The Hon. Peter Primrose
The Hon. Natalie Ward

The Hon. John Ajaka, *The President*

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**

CORRECTED

The ACTING CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing for the inquiry into budget estimates 2020-2021 initial hearings. Before I commence, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I pay respects to the Elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present. I welcome President Ajaka and accompanying officials to this hearing today. The Committee will examine the proposed expenditure for the portfolio of the Legislature. Today's hearing is open to the public and is being broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record Committee members or witnesses, people in the public gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I also remind media representatives that they must take responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat. All witnesses in budget estimates have a right to procedural fairness according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. There may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In those circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days.

President Ajaka, I remind you that you and your officers accompanying you are free to pass notes and refer directly to your advisers seated at the table behind you. Any messages from advisers or members' staff seated in the public gallery should be delivered through the Committee secretariat. We expect that transcripts of this hearing will be available on the web from tomorrow morning. Finally, could everyone please turn off their mobile phones or set them to silent for the duration of the hearing.

CORRECTED

JOHN GREGOR, Director, Financial Services, Department of Parliamentary Services, sworn and examined

DAVID BLUNT, Clerk of the Parliaments, and Clerk of the Legislative Council, Department of the Legislative Council, sworn and examined

MARK WEBB, Chief Executive, Department of Parliamentary Services, affirmed and examined

The ACTING CHAIR: Today's hearing will be conducted from 9.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. with the President, with questions from the Opposition and crossbench members only. If required, an additional 15 minutes will be allocated at the end of the session for Government questions. As there is no provision for any witness to make an opening statement before the Committee commences questioning, we will begin with questions from the Opposition.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Mr President, I just want to pursue a line of questioning associated with members of Parliament's staff. Could you outline to the Committee how those rates of pay and conditions are set?

The PRESIDENT: Thank you. I will actually hand over to David Blunt and Mark Webb in relation to it and then I will just add a few things to it after they finish.

Mr WEBB: I will start. Thank you, Mr Buttigieg. The number of staff in each member's office is set by the independent tribunal—the Parliamentary Remuneration Tribunal [PRT]. That sets the numbers of staff. The conditions of employment are set by an annual determination of the Presiding Officers. The rate of pay for electorate officers, senior electorate officers and secretary/research assistants [SRAs] has been maintained for quite a long time at a similar level, obviously indexed for the annual wage rises. I have looked into how the original rate of pay was set, but it was so long ago that there are not any records left of that. The amount of pay has been using the standard Wages Policy Taskforce parameters. Last year, for instance, it went up by 0.3 per cent and the year before 2.5 per cent. But the base rate of pay has not been re-examined since before we have records.

The PRESIDENT: What I wanted to add to that is to give you a couple of examples from a practical point of view. Where electorate staff had, for example, 2.4 staff, originally two staff had to remain in the electorate office and the 0.4 could only come to Parliament. After recommendations PRT changed that with firstly, the 2.4 could be either here or at the electorate offices, and at the very last occasion submissions were made by both Mr Speaker and I that the 2.4 should increase to three. That has occurred for the electorate staff and again the flexibility arises. Most recently, there was the issue of certain members of the Opposition acquiring additional staff because of the additional workload. That too was approved. That too has occurred.

Mr WEBB: On that, I should say that those additional staff, because they were not either electorate officers or SRAs, we have gone through a process of working with the members affected to create a position description, evaluate that and the rate of pay has been set based on the independent evaluation of that position description.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: My understanding of how this works in the broader public sector is that the work value, if you like, is tied to a clerical scale and then there is a measurement—a calibration, if you like—of tasks and what these people do and then you land somewhere on that pay scale. I am sure this has been raised in the past, but has there been any thought of transferring these people to that broader public sector pay scale so that there is a more standardised evaluation of their work value and their rates of pay and things like that?

Mr WEBB: The current pay is based around that clerical scale, so there is a connection to that clerical scale. There has not been the kind of evaluation that you are talking about, Mr Buttigieg, for quite some time. In fact, I do not have any records that indicate any such evaluation being done. I am sure it was at some point, but I do not have any records of it so it was a fair while ago.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Could you just talk us through that to reconcile those two comments? It is tied to the scale, but there is no evaluation. It seems counterintuitive.

Mr WEBB: There may have been an evaluation at some point. I do not have any records of that evaluation. It was long enough ago that there are not any records.

Mr BLUNT: If I could just add to that, as you know I have been around here for a while and I think the establishment of the electorate officer pay rates certainly predated me coming here in 1990. The establishment of the secretary/research assistant positions for members of the Legislative Council at an equivalent pay level also predates that. So it is many years. My understanding is that the secretary/research assistant positions are tied to a clerk grade 3 to grade 5 level, so there is that tie-in. But in terms of having position descriptions re-evaluated, that does not happen automatically every year. That only gets triggered by—for instance, in one of our departments

CORRECTED

that would get triggered by a restructure for instance. You might have new positions created with new roles and then you would have those position descriptions sent off for evaluation. There are public sector rules and arrangements for how those evaluations take place. That is why there has not been a job evaluation process applied to those salary rates for many years.

The PRESIDENT: Can I just also add, Mr Buttigieg, again, it is only when a brand new position is created where submissions are made for a new staff member to be created—as what happened recently with members of the Opposition. Suddenly you find that they do not fit into an existing category and that is why Mr Webb had to go through the procedures of undertaking the equivalent pay rate for them.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: If they are tied to 3 to 5 clerical level, is it possible that over time they have gotten out of sync with where the true value of their work is? In other words, if you are stuck in this band and then you are getting your 0.3s or whatever your average, then there is this possibility that you are not really valuing the worth of the job because you could have someone on 3 to 5 who is actually maybe a 7 to 8 with all the admin and clerical duties, and whatever they do. Is that not possible because of the way that this is structured?

The PRESIDENT: Can I answer you this way, Mr Buttigieg?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure.

The PRESIDENT: It is an excellent question. Let me take that part on notice, but let me also indicate that maybe it well and truly is time to have a look at the whole scenario. We have been—I have been—focusing enormously with the PRT to obtain additional staff literally in my four years as President. The focus has always been getting from 2.4 to 3, getting additional staff here, getting additional staff there. We have secured that. It is probably now well and truly time that we have a look at what you have just raised. So let me take it on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Am I to take that, Mr President, that you are withdrawing your resignation?

The PRESIDENT: Thank you so much for that. That reminds me, Chair, you indicated I have 21 days for questions on notice. I was wondering if we could extend that to 35 days as I leave in 30 days, and I am sure my successor, he or she, will be very happy to—

The ACTING CHAIR: No, I can't do that, Mr President. I actually had to suppress a revolution here. We were going to cancel the hearing today and give you all questions on notice.

The PRESIDENT: Thirty-five days. Even better.

The ACTING CHAIR: No, 21 days.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Followed by a supplementary.

The ACTING CHAIR: You don't get off that easy.

Mr BLUNT: I just wanted to correct something I said before. I think I indicated that the SRAs—secretary research assistants—were currently pegged to the clerical grades 3 to 5. It is grades 4 to 5.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Grades 4 to 5? Okay. But I think there is a general agreement that all this needs to be looked at in terms of its synchronicity.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, agreed. You can take it that I have now instructed both Mark Webb and David Blunt to start immediately looking at it before I go.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Great. I want to tie off this last line of questioning in terms of a similar related subject, I guess—work value. My understanding is that there are staff members who are receive an all incidence employment allowance that equates to about 3½ hours per week of overtime. Would that accurate?

Mr WEBB: They do get an all incidence allowance. I am not quite sure of what hourly rate it goes to, so I will have to take that on notice. But there is an all incidence allowance, yes.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Let's call it 3½—that may be somewhat accurate or inaccurate—but I think the point is that during a sitting week the potential is for them to work up to 28 hours of overtime due to the midnight sittings. I know my staff work 17-hour days sometimes. So there is an issue there in terms of out in the broader public sector, I guess, and in industry in general you would get overtime rates—in the industries I used to organise for, time and a half for the first two hours, double time after that. Would you acknowledge that there is a significant disparity in recognition of that overtime that these staff do?

CORRECTED

The PRESIDENT: There is no doubt. I am in the same position with my staff as you are with your staff. There is no doubt that when Parliament is sitting, staff are required to work a lot longer. When I first came here, they worked those late-night sittings. They seemed to dissipate and all of a sudden we started what one could call family-friendly hours. I don't think you can say that anymore for us. Again, Mark Webb has taken that part of how many hours on notice. Rather than take it on notice, I will ask them to review that as well as the grading that you mentioned earlier.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thank you, Mr President.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: If I can ask a couple, Mr President. Please also refer these, obviously, to the staff. For about six years now at the end of every estimates, I have asked the clerks about the possibility of having countdown clocks in these hearings. It is incredibly difficult, particularly as this is one of the few things when time is of the essence and people are constantly asking questions, to try to view a little clock and make yourself known during hearings to the staff to find out how long you actually have, particularly if someone is asking questions. It would seem not unreasonable if a countdown clock could be made available for estimates so that all members could see how long that time of questioning has. It would make it easier than me sitting here trying to wave at the relevant staffer.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Primrose, forgive me. To be honest, I am not aware of this, but I agree with you completely. I look at the countdown clock literally every few seconds when I am in the Chamber. It is something I can't survive without. So why we can't have a countdown clock in this brand-new facility? I am sure we can.

Mr WEBB: We were successful last year in getting some money for a complete audiovisual refit of both the Chambers and the committee rooms. We are intending to introduce such a feature as a part of the audiovisual project, as well as doing things like—you would have seen that the air conditioning in this room sometimes gets a little loud, so fixing things like that as well to make sure that each of the rooms can be used for committee hearings completely.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: So we can expect to have clocks available in each room where estimates are being held next time?

Mr WEBB: Yes. By August maybe not; by February next year, yes. Certainly by this time next year.

The PRESIDENT: You can't see him, but Mike Price is nodding over there behind you. Let the record show he is nodding yes.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you. I have asterisked it for my follow-up questions next time. You have just mentioned the Preston Stanley Room air conditioning. Particularly when you are doing webinars in here, it is almost impossible and there is nowhere to turn it off. When you ask for it to be turned off and you are lucky for it to be turned off, as you know, the water system continues and it is impossible to hear. So that is going to be rectified?

Mr WEBB: Yes. There are three sources of sound that are affecting this room: the garbage room just below us, the air conditioning is also affecting it—the air conditioning in the room—and some stuff happening in catering. We have identified all of that now and we have a plan to fix it so this room can become a bit better for these kinds of events, both the committee hearings and, as you say, things like webinars.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you. That would be great. Again, it will be one of my supplementary questions in August. Thank you. Is the security room here ever not staffed?

Mr WEBB: No, it is 24/7. The security downstairs, and also there are people in the traffic box, and people on patrol all day every day.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I will give you an example of a member. A member leaves her keys in the office—not unusual. Later in the day, she rings up and there is no answer on security. Rings three times. She finally gives up. She has to go; she has to leave. She has her phone and is able to use her pass and whatever—her Mastercard to get a taxi home. She comes back the next day, makes inquiries and is told, "That was probably a changeover."

Mr WEBB: If anyone has that experience, they should bring that to me. That should not happen. The extension 2600 is manned all day every day. There should never be a time when that number is not answered. So if that has happened, please let me know the details and I will look into it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: So there is no changeover period?

Mr WEBB: Obviously the special constables do go on rotation and change over, but the phone should be manned at all times, even through the changeover.

CORRECTED

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: So I will be able to assure this member that there was obviously—let me get this right—confusion in relation to that and that it will not ever occur again, if it occurred.

Mr WEBB: That is right. If that happened I would give my apologies to the member because that should not happen.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Is it possible to get a list of all staffing positions in the Department of Premier and Cabinet [DPC] by staffing grade—for example, 17 people are grade X? I am not interested in the names, but just the staffing grades within DPC.

Mr WEBB: Absolutely—of the Department of Parliamentary Services [DPS], I assume you mean. Yes.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Sorry. What did I say?

Mr WEBB: DPC.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Sorry. I am happy to get one in DPC as well.

Mr WEBB: I couldn't help you out with DPC, but DPS, yes, absolutely.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: There is no hope with DPC, but DPS—that would be valuable. Thank you.

The PRESIDENT: We will take that on notice.

Mr WEBB: Done.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: How long do I have?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Four minutes.

The Hon. BEN FRANKLIN: Good point.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Four minutes. Excellent. How many people with a disability are employed at Parliament House? Please feel free to take it on notice.

Mr WEBB: Yes, I might need to take that on notice for the exact number.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Okay.

The PRESIDENT: Can I indicate to you this? Since becoming President, that is one of the main areas—that and accessibility—that I have been looking at extensively. I am disappointed to note that although there has been some increase, as far as I am concerned it is still not a sufficient increase. We still need to do quite a bit. The problem always stems to changing the mindset of an entire organisation and at the same time encouraging people with disability to actually apply for the positions. It really does take work on both sides. It is something that Mark Webb and I have discussed many times. It is something that Mark Webb and David and others have indicated some improvement about, but there is a long way to go. We will give you the exact figures on notice, Mr Primrose.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Thank you, Mr President. I think people appreciate and value the work that you have done in that area. Can I ask about a couple of issues that have been raised with me. One is the easy access issues associated with moving from level 9, near the lifts, into the level 9 garden. Can you talk to that and if there are any plans to do something about that?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. If I can just speak generally about that, I will not take too much of your time. I will put some of this on notice. There has been a huge amount of work that has been undertaken since I became President in relation to various diversity and inclusion strategies, the Disability Inclusion Action Plans [DIAP], changing places facilities, securing funds for the accessible ramps that are happening on Hospital Road and in the Speakers' Garden, and many others. I am pleased to note that quite a bit occurred prior to my becoming President, when I was Minister for Disability Services. There are the accessible toilets, level 9 accommodation, new hearing loops, motorised height-adjustable lecterns in the Jubilee, Strangers' and Preston-Stanley rooms and the ramp in Stranger's for functions.

We are very fortunate, Mr Primrose, in that we have a member who really understands the needs of people in wheelchairs. I am talking about Liesl Tesch. She has been amazing for us, because areas we would never have considered, something such as going to the table in the Chamber to be able to speak, she brings to our attention. I can assure you, as soon as she discovers something does not work, she lets us know immediately. We are pleased that she does that. Quite a bit of work is occurring in this area. You have only got to look outside and you will see that.

CORRECTED

Mr WEBB: The set of stairs that lead from the tower block up into the garden are problematic at the moment. Obviously, they are not currently suitable for people in wheelchairs especially, but even for an elderly person who might be reliant on a cane or a walking frame as well. We have done some planning around what we would do, but at the moment we do not have the money to make those changes. What I have done in the short term, on the other side of the garden there is the elevator that goes up into the new space. It is the world's slowest elevator. It is not the best from that point of view.

For many years I was told the only way we could fix that would be to do a complete replacement of the elevator. I guess there have been increases in elevator technology over the last little while. It currently runs at 0.5 of a meter per second. We now have a project that will take that up to 0.95, basically doubling the speed of that elevator, which means someone in a wheelchair can get to level 9 much faster than they were able to before. That is my short-term fix while we advocate for the money to do something bigger with the steps coming up to level 9.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I wanted to start by talking about the reports from the Federal Parliament in relation to sexual assault and harassment. Obviously, there have been reports of a former Liberal staffer in the New South Wales Parliament. We have also had incidents in the past. But we are at a point in time at the moment where we are not directly being impacted by these stories. However, it is causing parliaments around Australia to revisit their policies and guidelines. I would like to hear a bit more about what you have been doing on that. I note that the Harassment Free Workplace Policy was just updated. That refers back to the Grievance Policy. I understand that has not been updated since March 2018.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Boyd, can I give you firstly a whole picture?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Please do.

The PRESIDENT: Then I will hand over to Mr Webb. Critical incident reporting, absolutely. On 22 November the three officers—the two Clerks and Mr Webb—forwarded to all members and all staff a summary of what is available et cetera in relation to that. Yes, we have a Grievance Policy that was current as at March 2018 and, yes, we are looking at that. I can indicate that the Grievance Policy is 15 pages. We have an Anti-Bullying Policy, again current as at March 2018, also being looked at. That is 11 pages. We have a Harassment Free Workplace Policy. That is the most updated. That was updated in February 2021, so just recently. That is 10 pages. They are all very extensive.

The two Clerks and Mr Webb, the three senior managers in this Parliament, have been working extensively with both me and Mr Speaker in relation to this area to ensure that they are updated and to also look at areas of improvement, most importantly areas of education and areas of assistance to anyone who requires assistance. The fundamental message that we are trying to get out to everyone is, "If an incident occurs, please let one of us know immediately." The quicker we get to know about it, the quicker we can act on it and, most importantly, the quicker we can provide support for the person making the complaint. That is the fundamental issue for us. Mr Webb, would you like to add something? Then, Ms Boyd, it makes it easier for you to ask specific questions.

Mr WEBB: I hope you all saw the email we sent out last week, which summarised the current processes we have in place for people to report areas. But, as you quite rightly point out, the situation in Canberra is very concerning. So we have started reviewing all aspects of our ability to respond to such an incident and also the preventative steps that might be able to be in place as well. Just as an example of that, my staff in the HR area are very well trained. We have processes internally such that if there are two people involved in an incident, there is the ability to provide support to both, because that is, obviously, very important. We are looking at getting in some more advanced training in dealing with people in trauma or crisis, for instance, to help to make sure we provide more support for somebody who has been through a traumatic incident.

One of the things coming out of the Canberra situation and in talking to my counterpart down there is the capacity for the administration to support people who are really in a traumatic situation. It is bit different from having a beef with somebody in your team and you want to raise a complaint. If you have been through a traumatic situation, you need to have specific support. Of course, we have access to trauma-trained counsellors, which we can bring into play at any time. But one of the things coming out of what we are finding from Canberra is that those frontline people who initially get the complaint given to them also need to be able to deal with that situation.

I would like to thank several members who have come forward and made some suggestions, which we are working on at the moment. One of those included creating an advisory group with women around the organisation that would help craft some of the changes that we are looking for. I think that is a fantastic idea and that is something that we will be looking to implement as well. We are reviewing all of those documents that the President just read out, the Grievance Policy, Anti-Bullying Policy and Harassment Free Workplace Policy to see

CORRECTED

if there are any learnings from Canberra that we can implement there. One of the pieces of feedback was that lack of clarity. I heard several Federal members talking on the radio saying, "I don't know exactly what to do if someone came to me with that." That is why we put out the email last week, to try and make sure that people did know what to do. You might have noticed that around the place we have put up a paper copy of it on most noticeboards, so that people who might not access their email can see it as well. We are looking at some further training and support that we can provide on the preventative side of things as well.

Mr BLUNT: I can just add two things as well by way of context. I endorse everything that Mr President and Mark have just said and want to associate myself with everything they have said and say two further things. I am very conscious that as you ask these questions we are sitting here as four blokes. So of course we have a need to hear your voice and the voices of women. I think what Mark has just spoken about, the advisory group proposal, is really important. Secondly, although the events in Canberra focused on sexual assault and things that are, frankly, criminal matters, across the continuum is sexual harassment. Of course, there has been talk about bullying as well. As you would recall, Ms Boyd, having been elected in 2019, it was one of the things that I was very keen to address with newly elected members at the induction program in 2019. I addressed with members of the Legislative Council, when we gave an update on the changes to the code of conduct last year, the whole area of bullying and harassment. I think I started my pitch on that subject by noting that parliaments around the world have literally been torn apart over the past few years over issues about bullying and harassment, and how important it is that we address those issues.

There is a range of things that interplay between legal frameworks, but also culture. In my comments to the induction program, I spoke very much about the culture of the Legislative Council. I think that the fact that the staff in the parliamentary departments enjoy a really good culture in our interactions with members of the Legislative Council and that there is generally a very good culture amongst members of the Legislative Council, and that perspective is something that I wanted to imbue newly elected members with as well. But that is not to say that there is not a heck of a lot else that we can do in this space. Those words that I shared at the induction program I have appended to a submission that I have just made to the Privileges Committee inquiry into the proposal for a compliance officer for the New South Wales Parliament. So those words are now on the public record in that submission.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. And thank you all for your comments and updates. I think that was really useful context and particularly, Mr Blunt, when you referred to the fact that, yes, we have in front of us a panel of all men. Which brings me to ask the question: What external review have you had of the policies that you have been working on?

Mr WEBB: The policies as they stand at the moment, we brought in external expertise to help create them, but we have not done an external review. That is one of the proposals that has been made—to bring somebody in from the outside with expertise to look over all of the policies, even the one that we have just provided a small update on, to try to make sure that we are getting the benefit of expert external focus.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes, absolutely, because best practice in this area would be to have an external organisation such as Rape & Domestic Violence Services Australia or someone like that to come and make sure that we have the best possible guidelines that we can have. I also note that, when we are looking at the protections that apply to political staffers, the only real protections are those that are in the members' staff conditions of employment determination, and I do not think that refers at all to sexual harassment or anything of that kind. I wonder if that is another area you could look at.

Mr BLUNT: Ms Boyd, my understanding is that the determination does have a link to all the policies that the President referred to before. That is really in the context of members' staff being required to adhere to and implement those policies, in terms of the conduct and behaviour of members' staff towards their member, towards one another and towards the staff of the parliamentary departments. Mark, did you want to add anything?

Mr WEBB: When I say we want to review everything, I do mean everything. It is not just about where standalone documents sit, but it is about how these things interact with each other. I think what you were pointing to is a good example of that. It is an interaction between a condition of employment and a set of policies. Does that interaction actually have the desired effect? That is one of the things we do want to look at. How the wording in codes of conduct for departmental staff and members' staff sits in is another area—just making sure all those things line up to give a very clear expectation about the standard of behaviour that is expected in the Parliament.

David Blunt mentioned the induction for members. I was in that session, and I think he was very clear and very powerful in what he said. We do similar things with staff inductions. All three departments—obviously we are talking only about the LC and DPS here—have, as part of our code of conduct, a real focus on making sure that the behaviour of parliamentary staff will be appropriate, but I think everything has to be re-looked at. One of the big things that I have taken away from what has come out of Canberra is the danger of complacency in this

CORRECTED

space and the way in which a workplace's culture can move forward in a way that leaves policies and the like behind. So pretty much there is not anything I am not willing to re-look at, at the moment

The PRESIDENT: How long before you set it up?

Mr WEBB: In terms of the advisory group—the President asked me just to give an indication—we will be making a proposal to the Presiding Officers this week and we would look at establishing it as soon as next week, if we could.

The PRESIDENT: Can I just finish this point just very quickly? You are correct. Everything is being looked at. I want to see this advisory set-up. The one thing I learned when I was Minister for disability services is the absolute value of an advisory board, or advisory committee, around me because the reality is that, we can bring in all the experts you want us to bring in but, nothing will assist us more than the people here telling us what they are experiencing and how we should move forward.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Absolutely. Just one more question on this before I hand back to my colleague. We need to be able to measure our success in this area or our progress in this area. You would have seen from last week there was an article reporting a survey of staffers in Federal political offices, saying that one in eight had been sexually harassed or assaulted in the workplace in the past year. Do we have anything in the works in terms of surveying staffers in the New South Wales Parliament so that we can then judge the progress of these measures?

Mr WEBB: I think that is an excellent question. For the parliamentary staff we have an existing mechanism in place. We voluntarily participate in the People Matter Employee Survey that happens annually and that does have specific questions on bullying, harassment et cetera. So that gives us a measure for parliamentary staff. But you are quite right in saying that does not extend to political staff across the board. That was one of the suggestions that was raised with me last week as a way of having some measurement around those things. So I have not done this yet, but my intention is to talk to the Public Service Commissioner about that segment of the People Matter Employee Survey and see whether that is something that we can adopt in a survey of political staff. Again, partly so that it is comparable and so that we have a consistent set of information across everybody who works in the Parliament.

The PRESIDENT: Ms Boyd, I think it is important to remember that parliamentary staff work for the Parliament. It is their boss. But political staff work for you, the members. You are their bosses. And that is an issue. As much as Parliament has a responsibility, of course, to protect and assist, and I as the Presiding Officer ultimately have responsibility if there is an issue between you and your staffer, the reality is that we also have to respect the fact that the staff are employed by you and work for you, and that you are technically their supervisor. So it is an area that we are looking at, but it has also got a little bit of sensitivity in that it cannot appear that we are taking your staff away from you.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I totally appreciate that and I understand the sensitivities, and that is one of the things that creates some cultural issues as well.

The PRESIDENT: Yes, there is no doubt.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: We wrestle with that. But ultimately these people are employed by the Parliament and there is a responsibility from the Parliament to those people.

The PRESIDENT: Accepted.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr President and Mr Blunt, I am sorry, I had to duck out for a few minutes and I may have missed this question if it was asked, but the different structure here, as far as I understand it, of employment is that the parliamentary staff actually work for the Parliament, but they do it through a process of, I suppose, delegation of authority to the members, is that right? Something like that?

The PRESIDENT: When you say "parliamentary staff", do you mean the clerks, DPS, or do you mean members' actual staff?

The ACTING CHAIR: I am talking about the staff who work in our office because they are not political appointments.

The PRESIDENT: They are members' staff.

The ACTING CHAIR: They are the parliamentary staff who work in our office. We are responsible for them on a day-to-day basis and in that sense they are no different from the staff working in the Chamber, for example, or anything else.

CORRECTED

Mr BLUNT: Mr Borsak, under the Members of Parliament Staff Act 2013, the staff in each of your offices are your employees. So you are the employer of your staff.

The PRESIDENT: Not the Parliament.

The ACTING CHAIR: That is where I was going. I might have it wrong, but listening to the media in relation to what is happening in Canberra, there was some talk of actually changing that perhaps, because the reporting line perhaps made people more exposed to being bullied or sexually harassed or doing more than that.

The PRESIDENT: This is what I was saying about the sensitivity to Ms Boyd in relation to "they're your staff" as opposed to those who work in the Legislative Council, those who work in DPS, and other Parliament staff. But David can—

The ACTING CHAIR: Under the Act, they may be our staff but they actually work for the Parliament in a sense, don't they?

The PRESIDENT: They work in the parliamentary precinct is probably the better way of describing it.

The ACTING CHAIR: Yes.

Mr WEBB: It is a complex area and the Members of Parliament Staff Act obviously locates hiring and firing responsibility with the member, and day-to-day direction with the member. So if you have someone who can hire, fire and day-to-day direct, you are their employer. Having said that, we have some responsibilities. Obviously, the work health and safety responsibilities that we have as responsible officers in the precinct across the electorate office network—although we are not talking about that here—still are in place. To give an example of that, we did make a change to the Members of Parliament Staff Act a couple of years ago to give the Presiding Officers power to step in and terminate the employment of a member's staff if they are found to have engaged in serious misconduct. Prior to that, we could have investigated someone and found that they had engaged in misconduct, but if the member refused to act the person would stay in the building. We could take certain steps to mitigate the work health and safety risk that would come from that, but we felt it was important that the Presiding Officers, given that overlap in work health and safety, be able to act.

The ACTING CHAIR: That leads me to the next part of my question. Maybe this one is for the President. Are you of the view that the workplace environment here in this Parliament is perhaps as "toxic" as what we are led to believe it is in Canberra?

The PRESIDENT: No. I really don't. I have been here 14 years now. I have experienced all facets of the Westminster system in the sense of Opposition, Government, Parliamentary Secretary, Minister, Presiding Officer. I have lost count of how many people I have employed in here. I consider most colleagues as friends and I get to know their staff. From what we are reading and what we are hearing about Canberra, no, I do not believe we are anywhere near that situation, and I would be very surprised if we were and I am wrong.

Mr WEBB: Could I just mention we do have an array of—I guess you would call them—preventative options for members. Sometimes if the culture in an office is starting to deteriorate—if the relations between either people in the office or between the staffer and the member are not going as well as they could do—there are a range of things that my human services team can do, including bringing in an external expert to help mediate the workplace. We are finding those preventative measures, where members take advantage of those, can prevent relationships deteriorating to the point where you might get a level of dysfunction, and I would very much encourage any member who wants to take advantage of those services. They are very much there. This is more in the bullying and general harassment space; I don't think it is designed to help in the sexual harassment or assault side of things, which would have a different set of motivators. But in terms of general workplace behaviour, we have got those preventative measures that we can take confidentially.

The ACTING CHAIR: Given that, surely if we are going to do anything in that space or other spaces—and I am not saying we should not—it should be led by evidence of what happens here as opposed to what might happen in Canberra.

Mr WEBB: This is where Ms Boyd's suggestion about—because we do have data about parliamentary staff, but we do not have data on members' staff. Being able to collect some of that evidence we think is an important part of the work that we do.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Borsak, can I indicate in my four years as the President, I have only ever had to intervene once, and that was not between a staff member and a member, that was between two staff members. That is the only time I have ever had to intervene because it was brought to my attention. As I said to Ms Boyd, at the end of the day, we need to hear from you if there is an issue at the outset. It just makes it so much easier to resolve an issue and prevent it from escalating if we are aware of it and we can intervene at the early stages.

CORRECTED

The ACTING CHAIR: I might just say something from my personal point of view, having worked in this place for over 10 years now. I find the environment here is very conducive and supportive from a work point of view. I find everybody, despite the cut and thrust of politics occasionally, very respectful of one another, certainly in our House. I find the level of professionalism, not just from you but also from Mr Blunt and Mr Webb et cetera—websites sometimes excluded—also at a very high level. I would hate to think that we have got to start putting in too many regulations and controls around it. I think whatever we try to do should be evidence based and evidence driven, and if things do deteriorate somewhere, or somebody does materially something wrong, then we should properly consider what we can do to fix that. But while we have got things running at what I think is a pretty good level as far as this Parliament is concerned—and maybe part of that has to do with the fact that perhaps here in Sydney we are lot more rooted in the realities of the day to day and what happens outside this gate, as opposed to being isolated in Canberra. That is just my personal view.

The PRESIDENT: Again, this is why I am a great believer in having an advisory group around the management team. Because it is sad if the only time we hear about these issues is once a year at budget estimates, or twice a year. It would be good to be able to have regular meetings and go from there. So I am hoping to actually start this before I go so that my successor can continue with it.

The ACTING CHAIR: Well, why don't you stay and finish it?

The PRESIDENT: You might move a notice of motion forbidding me from leaving.

The ACTING CHAIR: I could do that.

The PRESIDENT: That will upset a few Liberals.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I need again to raise, we might continue this at the supplementaries.

The PRESIDENT: From a former President, thank you.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: There are lots of opportunities that require members of the public to attend, as you would be aware. Can I please continue just with a couple more questions relating to easy access issues that have been raised with me, just to seek your advice and particularly advice from Mr Webb. Easy access issues associated with the gym have been raised with me. Can you please talk to that?

The PRESIDENT: Absolutely. As I was indicating earlier, we have done quite a bit of work in the four years I have been President. I am pleased to say that quite a bit of work was done by the former President and the former Speaker. The gym is still one of those big areas that still requires a substantial amount of work to gain access to it. It is currently being looked at. Currently—and I will ask Mr Webb to see how far it has gone—we need to obtain specific funding for it if we are going to do it. The short answer is this: There was a huge list of areas to be undertaken and it would have been lovely to wave a magic wand to get money for all of them. But what we were able to do is to just get money each and every budget and be able to undertake quite a bit of the work that you see going around you.

One of my priorities, which had nothing to do with easy access, of course, was the bollards in Macquarie Street. We had to obtain the funding for that; it was fairly extensive. We have obtained the funding and we hope to finish that work later on this year. That was for security reasons, in particular for schoolchildren who line up to get in here. The thought of having hundreds of schoolchildren lining up and no protection was just unacceptable for me. Mr Webb, can you let them know where it is exactly now? We have been talking about this for a while.

Mr WEBB: Yes, that is right. There are three primary areas with the gym that I am concerned about. One is the very front entrance. The door is not big enough for someone in a wheelchair, and it is a swing door where it should be a sliding door. And, of course, there is that little set of steps as soon as you walk in that go straight down. That really needs to be a ramp, or something that would allow wheelchair access coming through. So the entranceway is one area. The second area is the bathrooms. The bathrooms are not set up for accessible access at all, so there are some real issues there. And the third, which we have been able to do a little bit about, is the layout of the gym itself—how people can make their way between machines and the like.

Now we can re-look at the layout of equipment, but there is some work we could do in the gym that would make that easier to create access pathways and the like through the gym. As the President said, especially the first two items are quite expensive beyond what our minor capital works budget could handle on a year-to-year basis. We have put in funding bids for that work; we will continue to do so. We do view it as an important part of the accessibility to the precinct, but we have given priority to things like a ramp at the Hospital Road entrance and a ramp down into the Speaker's Garden and that elevator I was talking about before, as being more high-priority, high-need areas at the moment. But certainly it is in our thinking.

CORRECTED

The PRESIDENT: The great news, Mr Primrose, is as we deal with all of the other matters being dealt with and no longer need to seek funding, the amount of funding we seek will continue to shrink so that hopefully we will get to a stage that this might be—I will probably get myself into trouble by saying this—one of the ways to solve it, of course, is to remove the squash court. You remove the squash court and you suddenly have a huge extra amount of space. I mentioned that once about three years ago and never mentioned it again after what happened to me.

Mr WEBB: Mr President, you have just guaranteed that I will get at least seven emails over the next few days.

The PRESIDENT: Now that I am going, I am going to mention it.

Mr BLUNT: Given the results of my recent squash matches with Mr Frappell, I would endorse the President's idea.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: This is a more complicated one, and I appreciate there may be no solution at this stage, and that is the issue that has been raised in relation to people with disabilities, particularly wheelchair access to the Chamber itself, where at the moment people are required to go to the President's Gallery as opposed to the visitors' gallery. Can you maybe comment on that?

The PRESIDENT: Yes, happy to. I am going to go back a bit, if I may. When I was Minister for Disability Services, I had a group of people here in wheelchairs and we were going to announce some wonderful things that we were doing for people with disabilities as a Minister under the Disability Inclusion Action Plan. I was telling them how everyone is going to be equal, everyone is going to be perfect—lo and behold, there is an emergency alarm going off and everyone had to evacuate to the Hospital Road park. Of course, everyone in a wheelchair was left there and I stayed with them in a corner. It was just a demonstration; we knew it was not real.

Apparently, if it had happened in real time—when I asked, "How do they get out if it was a real fire?" the answer was, "Normally the fireys or someone pick up the chair and carry them out." That is why we are doing all of these disability ramps. That is just completely unacceptable. Again, the Chamber is one of the areas, like the gym, that we seek funding for. But, again, the reality is unless we build more ramps to go in—you cannot go through members because you have to build a ramp. As you know, when Parliament first sat for the beginning of the term, I had a ramp built in the Chamber so that members could go through that ramp.

We could build one permanently, but that is going to take a considerable amount of cost and it takes up a considerable part of that. If we build a ramp from the stairs at the front court there—again, a huge amount of money—then I have problems with heritage, the look of the building, the ramp, et cetera. So that is an area that we are still looking at, but we would need to gain funding. Realistically, the best way into the Chamber, because there is that ramp there before you get to the Chamber door, is in the President's Gallery. No-one has ever been refused. The most I have ever received was that three people would be in there. I just remove the benches and three people can fit there. We can always have the other side if we need to. That is the situation, Peter, that we are with at the moment.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I appreciate that it is complicated.

Mr WEBB: I should say, just to reinforce something that the President just said, the heritage considerations at the front of the building are quite significant. We have looked at three options, one is improving access inside the building, as the President says. What can we do to make it easier to get through? The second would be some form of ramps at the front of the building that hits heritage. The third is, essentially, glass elevators at the front of the building so that it minimises the site issues there on both the LC and the LA side. But you can imagine that whenever we mention that to a heritage consultant, they go grey and start to tremble slightly, so there are those big heritage concerns as well. It is something that I am very concerned about. At the moment, the only way someone in a wheelchair can get to the lobby is to go down the ramp on level 6 and then up that one elevator through to the lobby area. That is one of the reasons why I have prioritised speeding up that elevator, because it really is too slow at the moment. But there are no easy answers and it is something that we look at a lot.

The PRESIDENT: Sadly, Mr Primrose, when it was built in 1856 no-one even thought of this. Not only did they not think of it, they did not even allow scope for it in any shape or form to happen.

Mr WEBB: To be honest, the tower block built in the 1970s did not get much thought to it either. Retrofitting accessibility into a heritage space has been quite difficult.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: What trumps particular legislation requirements in relation to the relevant disability requirements as opposed to heritage? I will just leave that one with you.

Mr WEBB: It's a fascinating area.

CORRECTED

The PRESIDENT: Have a good look at the Disability Inclusion Act, brought in by a very good Minister at the time. Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to have a provision that, a bit like section 109 of the Constitution—whatever was in that Act it prevailed over every other Act, but it was not one I was going to get through. Again, there is so much that is positive that is happening. We should not lose sight of that. One of the best aspects, I believe, was being able to convince then Speaker, Shelley Hancock, to have a changing room in this Parliament House. I think we are only one of two buildings in the entire Sydney CBD that has a changing room for an adult with a disability to be able to be changed by one of the parents. That really only came about because Shelley Hancock was yelling at me, as the Minister, to do some at other areas, and I yelled back at her saying, "You do one in the Parliament." That is how it came about.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Strange you should mention that because my final question on this topic in the 10 minutes that I have left, if my glasses can see over there, is: What improved signage is planned for public access to the adult change station on level 6?

Mr WEBB: That is an excellent question.

The PRESIDENT: That is a great question. I intend to have a walk around now. I know exactly where it is. I opened it. But that is a fantastic question. It has been used, I understand, quite extensively, and it has been well and truly advertised. There is an app that parents are able to use to search all of New South Wales, "Where are these changing rooms," and we immediately come up on the app. As for signage within our building, it is a good look.

Mr WEBB: The audiovisual project also includes—

The PRESIDENT: You are being handed something by Robert Nielsen.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: You may have an answer there.

Mr WEBB: Yes, an excellent part of the answer. I will say, the audiovisual project I mentioned earlier also includes electronic signage. One of the intents is to use that electronic signage to provide better wayfinding for people within the building, not just to the change room. I think most people who walk in, for instance, could be forgiven for not realising we have a public cafe, not understanding what the Reconciliation Wall is for et cetera, so we want to build in much better wayfinding as a part of that. We are on their website—the place that lists all of the changing places.

The PRESIDENT: As I said, there is an app for it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Yes, an important website. I am familiar with it. A former Minister was heavily involved in getting that—

The PRESIDENT: It was one of your amendments that I amended. It was a great amendment too.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Do you mind if I just tack on a question?

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Please.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Just this morning a person with a sore leg was dragging a suitcase through the main entrance and was about to go up the stairs with the bag, unable to go in the other way because they did not have an access pass. So I let them through and showed them where the elevator was, but, again, there is no signage. There are no directions for people.

The PRESIDENT: Had they mentioned as they went through the gatehouse—but we will have a talk to the security and, again, that is where one of the new electronic signs is meant to go—the security would advise them immediately to go through the disability entrance. There are signs for disability access there, so, again, had he seen that—but he could have asked security. That is a really good point.

Mr WEBB: The front of the building is problematic. The process that is meant to happen is security then contacts the front desk, the front desk sends somebody down who shows them down and around and up. My concern is if you are there with somebody not in a wheelchair, they would bound up the stairs and they are in the lobby in 10 seconds, but you have to wait for someone to come down, go down and around, wait for the world's slowest elevator, go up and it could be 10 minutes later by the time you get to the lobby. So we need to improve that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: And a lot of people feel like, you know, yes, it will hurt them to go up the stairs—they might be an elderly person or someone who is not as mobile and they do not want to be a bother because they do not see themselves as being, necessarily, a person with a disability.

CORRECTED

The PRESIDENT: Can I also indicate that we always immediately give access through the parking. If we get phone calls from people with disability, wheelchairs, mobility issues et cetera, we immediately allow the car to drive into the car park and to be able to go through that way. It is a quicker and more effective way of doing it, but you have to get that information out. With the new ramps being built on Hospital Road, they won't even have to go into the car park anymore. All of that will make huge changes and huge improvements. There is an easier way to get in—if I can use that term—that is the message that we need to get out.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: If I can now move on to another topic, by way of introduction I would like to read out a short statement and then put a question to you. The statement I read out is:

The majority of Hansard staff are now on temporary contracts. This is an unprecedented situation. Hansard has traditionally comprised a permanent skilled workforce, supplemented by small numbers of casual staff during sitting weeks when needed. The current situation of default temporary contracts is causing significant uncertainty and stress for the affected staff and impacts negatively on the morale of the entire team.

Parliamentary reporting is a specialised skill requiring a particular mix of capabilities. Expertise in the areas of formal written English, parliamentary procedure, technological innovation and Hansard style and practice is gained over the course of years rather than weeks or months. It also demands a high level of commitment of time and energy, and the sacrifice of work-life balance for large parts of the year.

The current insecure work environment is not amenable to the kind of work that Hansard does and can have an adverse effect on the quality, accuracy, timeliness and accessibility of the written historical record of Parliament, which is central to the democratic process. Hansard staff are intensely committed to the work they do and the quality of the Hansard product.

The question is: Can you please comment on that, and do you have any plans to increase the number of permanent staff in Hansard?

The PRESIDENT: Thank you. Can I indicate a couple of things, if I may. First of all, we all accept how valuable Hansard is. I do not think I remember one felicitations by everyone and anyone over the last 14 years where Hansard is not singled out and thanked enormously. Staffing levels have increased significantly in Hansard in the last two financial years—from 22 in 2018-19 with an additional 13 staff members. If I can indicate a couple of areas, in 2017-18 the total headcount for Hansard was 23, which was a full-time equivalent of 21; in 2020-21, the headcount is now 33, with a full-time equivalent of 30—a very substantial increase in Hansard numbers.

Now, that is not to say that they are not continually working harder, if I can use that expression, because the reality is the workload for Hansard has increased substantially. I will give some short issue response, if I may. As a result of high committee workload, the amount of Hansard staff required is enormous. We also have a situation where both Houses are sitting late, sittings on at exactly the same time, committee work occurring whilst other committees are sitting—all of that has a great impact on Hansard. So we are continually monitoring it. We are continually monitoring seeking additional funding for Hansard.

Then there is the issue of technology. The reality is technology has also made a huge impact. When you look at the number of Hansard in 2017-18 and 2020-21, even in those few years there has been a great change in technology, which does assist Hansard. But no matter how good your technology is, when Parliament is sitting until 12 midnight, when two or three or four committees are happening all at the same time because of the additional committee work, you still need the people to be present. We are not going to end up, I do not believe—nor should we—with a situation where we are just going to have a computer there and nobody manning the computer. You have to have Hansard present with you.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I ask a follow-up on that? It is a pertinent point.

The PRESIDENT: Most certainly.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: This is an emblematic issue, I suppose, that we are dealing with in broader society with the advent of technology on an exponential increase in terms of capability. I think it would be silly of us not to at least deal with the possibility that there would be significant displacement. What has the Parliament done to assess the likelihood of that technology getting to the point where you could be looking down the barrel of replacing labour? How would you deal with that in terms of looking after people, making sure they are gainfully employed and all the rest of it?

The PRESIDENT: Mr Buttigieg, I am old school. I still remember the greatest technology change I thought would ever come that would change the whole legal profession was when the IBM electric computer came into being. We no longer had to use the manual. I am that old; I remember all of this. Then all of a sudden IBM came out with something even more incredible—the self-correcting ribbon, and I thought, that's it. It was just never going to get any greater than that.

The reality is this: I have spent quite a bit of time looking at technology in relation to AI technology. The very best that we have looked at and we would consider today would have an accuracy just under 80 per cent. It

CORRECTED

is just not high enough accuracy. I believe you would need 95 per cent; I am being told 90 per cent, 91 per cent, 92 per cent may suffice. But in all of those technologies, you still need people. You still need people monitoring. You still need people present. You still need people making the changes, because you are never going to get 100 per cent. So you cannot simply rely on that technology. But it is always being looked at. It is always being monitored. It is always being discussed. I just do not believe we are there yet. Now, how long before we get there? This is probably a great question to ask in three years' time. The reality is today it is just not there, and as far as staff are concerned, the staff are still there and we are increasing the number of staff. That is the most important aspect. We are not decreasing them. We are increasing them because—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr President, may I say in relation to my original question that of 20 reporters, nine are permanent and 11 are on temporary contracts. My question was: Do you have any plans to increase the number of permanent staff in Hansard?

Mr WEBB: Can I answer that? There were two things that drove the increases in the last couple of years. One was volume of activity, and the second was work health and safety. We have put in place much more stringent work health and safety provisions, which had a staffing impact. We needed more staff, effectively. That is the driving force behind the increases that the President spoke about before. However, the bids that we put in for that money were only provided to us on a year-by-year basis.

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

Mr WEBB: So we were given temporary money to improve the number of Hansard staff that we had. We put in a bid for permanent money to do so. We were not successful in getting the permanent money; we did get the temporary money. There is another bid in at the moment as part of the current budget round.

The PRESIDENT: Can I also just indicate that the permanent staff we had in 2017-18 were in fact 16. In 2020-21, as you said, there are 20. So we have actually had an increase of four in permanent staff. The part-time, if I can use that term, were seven in 2017-18; they were increased to 14. But, again, the funding that was obtained for that increase is temporary. Treasury likes to look at the need for Hansard with additional committee work, additional hours of sitting as a temporary situation. So they will not give us permanent funding, but we deal with it year to year. I know for a fact with the way our Chamber alone is going, it is not a temporary situation; it is a long-term situation. That is why we keep asking for long-term funding.

Mr WEBB: And we will continue to do so. On the question of AI, if I could just mention to Mr Buttigieg, we are monitoring the House of Commons doing a trial using technology for automated transcription. As the President indicated, the verbatim conversion rate is not at a level that we could introduce here. Also, quite frankly, the equipment we have in the Chambers and committee rooms is not of sufficient standard that we could even get that 80 per cent if we were to deploy it straightaway here.

We are focused on trying to improve the quality and reliability of the infrastructure in the Chambers and the infrastructure in committee rooms. We are monitoring that work that is happening. There are also some Australian jurisdictions that are starting to look into it as well. We are monitoring it. But I really want to get to the point that you made, which I absolutely agree with. These things can be anticipated and should be anticipated, and then work programs put in place to assist people to either make that next jump in their career—there might be someone who is interested in audiovisual technology and we can spend the next few years training.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I think this is my point, Mr Webb. I am glad that you took it up, because I think the idea that you can just assume that this is never going to happen—I mean, the House of Commons is trialling it.

Mr WEBB: Exactly.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I think it is very important to plan for these people to have gainful employment. Whether or not that is a diversion into other employment within the Parliament—three years sounds like a long time, but it is not.

Mr WEBB: It will all go by very quickly. I mean, we will always need editors, yes.

The PRESIDENT: Can I just indicate this? Take the full-times, firstly, not the casuals. The reality for our full-time is we are increasing it and continuing to increase it. I believe as we move on the live technology, the 20 will be required. There may be a drop in the casual numbers that are coming in. That is different. But from what you are saying I believe long term there is still a requirement for the full-time employees. And in fact, do not be surprised if we obtain the funding that we keep increasing the full-time employees.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I hope you are right, President, but you are telling me Treasury is on your back about temporary funding.

CORRECTED

The PRESIDENT: No, what I am saying to you—Treasury has been great. Last budget estimates I was here, I did not say Treasury was great.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is true.

The PRESIDENT: I was straight down the line. But they have been absolutely terrific. We have an increasing workload, whether it is committee workload, Hansard workload et cetera. We put in a bid for funding. They see it at first, and they have a right to see it, that this may be a temporary situation. They give us the funding based on that. If we establish that it becomes the norm, then of course our funding bids change for the full-time. But really, for the record, Treasury in this budget and for the past 12 months, especially with COVID et cetera, have been brilliant. We have not been knocked back on anything we have asked for that we have needed.

Mr WEBB: But I do take your point. Not just in Hansard but across the board I am always looking ahead at how we can support staff if there is a change in the area happening. For instance, if we get money that eventually automates some low-level HR processes, how can we help the staff move over to do higher-value work as a part of that. This is something that we are very much focused on. One of the successes that the President and the Speaker had was negotiating an exemption from the efficiency dividend for the next few years. I did want to be very clear: We are still trying to get the best value for taxpayers' money. But it means we can reinvest any savings we get into the Parliament, as opposed to having to hand it over to Treasury. That is going to help marvellously in the next few years to do that.

I should also mention that some of this technology has different applications as well. One of the things we are looking into, for instance, in the very short term is to be able to caption, live caption, what happens in the chambers and committees. That has been a real gap in what we have been able to do. It will probably be a more manual solution. There are companies that provide live-captioning services that are currently cheaper than getting a computer to do it. So we will probably look at live captioning by entering into a contract with someone. But that is something that we are looking at doing in the shorter term. So it is not just about automation of work: It is also about providing a better service to everyone as well.

Mr BLUNT: If I could just add that we understand from presentations about this at conferences of clerks and parliamentary officers that live captioning is really not just a luxury, it is very much a gateway to enhanced accessibility, which would be of benefit widely across the community.

Mr WEBB: Mr Primrose asked earlier about the hierarchy of legislation, which is, until it is tested in the courts, sometimes a little unclear. But one of the areas that we are very focused on is that I believe we do have obligations under the relevant accessibility Acts to provide accessible broadcast of what happens here in—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I look forward to the Clerks' paper on which aspect of privilege trumps.

The PRESIDENT: He will take it on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I just clarify, then? There is an acceptance that the amount of work that Hansard has to do has increased, but also there is an acceptance that we have had an increase in the number of staff over the past few years?

The PRESIDENT: Correct.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Are you also saying that you are pushing for further resourcing for more Hansard staff?

Mr WEBB: Yes, continuing the existing. The existing resourcing, if we do not get a continuation of it, would run out. So we are pushing very hard for a continuation of the existing resourcing. We are actually bringing in somebody to review the current workload to give us more evidence to support further bids for additional staffing down the track as well.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: So you are not necessarily requesting additional staff at this point?

Mr WEBB: I want to do the work, because we have been—Hansard is a very specialised area. The people who do it are excellent and excellently trained. Some of the newer people we have brought on board have been going through that training process. So we are trying to see the impact as they come online to make sure that we are—one of the things I could do, which might be cruel the pitch for the future, would be to over-egg it and ask for too much. I want to make sure I am not doing that. This review will help me to gather the evidence I need to demonstrate to Treasury the need for additional staff. That is important.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Understood. On one of the committees I am on there is a month's wait for the transcript and that is—

CORRECTED

Mr WEBB: Yes, and a lot of that is driven not just by the volume but—the note I just got said we have increased the current request by a little bit, pending that review happening. We have made a bid for a little bit extra this time round. Some of that has been driven by the number of staff. A lot has been driven by the work health and safety considerations that I put in place before. It became clear to me, a couple of years ago, that the conditions in which Hansard worked were not safe enough, certainly were not safe compared to modern requirements. The Hansard award is so old that no one can quite remember it being put into place. It does not, for instance, contemplate anywhere in the award the idea of a minimum allowable break. So the idea that you have a certain amount of time between shifts is not contemplated in the Hansard award at all, which is ludicrous.

The Industrial Relations Commission, the union and ourselves all agreed at a recent negotiation that the award is not fit for purpose, it does not meet modern standards, especially around work health and safety. So we have put in place a series of work health and safety limits, if you like, caps on the number of hours people can work in a week. The staff brought forward some very sensible and clear issues with having time off in between busy sitting weeks. I must admit that it took us a few months to go back and forth and find a good way of making that happen, but we now have a trial in place to have people having recovery breaks on the Friday of a sitting week or the following Monday, depending on committee activity.

Can I put on a record a chance to thank you all for the 36-hour sitting that you had later last year. It was marvellous. But we did have to do—I really, on the record, wanted to call out the work of Karen Turner, the Deputy Editor of Debates, who did spectacular work, rostering things such that fatigue was managed and people got breaks. There were times where we could only have people logging what was happening and then catch up on the transcription later. But those work health and safety issues I really wanted to put on the table, because the one thing I will not do—and I do apologise to all members—even at the expense of not meeting a time frame for a transcription—is put my staff in danger from fatigue or other things like that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Absolutely. That is fine. We perhaps need more staff.

Mr WEBB: It absolutely is the case. We may argue internally about what the best way to handle that fatigue is, but I think we do it constructively, and we come up with solutions and ideas. I again wanted to go on record in thanking the Hansard staff for engaging in that process so constructively. I think we have a good set of ideas now that we are trialling. Hopefully, they will work. But if they do not, we will try something else. It is important that people be safe.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Another group of overworked and excellent people is the committee staff. I understand that there is additional headcount that you are recruiting for at the moment. Where are we at?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. I can indicate that we have obtained additional funding for the committees. David Blunt will just find the additional funding for the committees. David Blunt will just find the figure for me. Again, I thank Treasury for that. We are at a situation now that if the workload continues exactly the way it is, we will cope with the staff we have. If the workload of committees keeps increasing the way it has over the past two years, we will be putting in another application for additional funding. We have not been knocked back on that.

To give members of the Committee some perspective on the growth in inquiry work: In July to December 2020, the first half of the 2021 financial year, 16 new inquiries were established or referred to committees and 14 reports were tabled by committees. By comparison, in the corresponding period of the Fifty-sixth Parliament, from July to December 2016, five new inquiries were established. So you can absolutely see. Another comparison across the two parliaments, comparing 2015-2016, the first full financial year of the Fifty-sixth Parliament, with 2019-2020: The number of hearings held by committees has increased from 72 to 124, while the number of submissions received has increased from 1,121 to 5,331 submissions. That excludes the submissions received from the Reproductive Health Care Reform Bill because we did not count those because we all got those as individual members by way of hundreds of thousands of emails.

At the end of December 2020, there were still 26 active inquiries before the committees and the budget estimates inquiries count as just one inquiry. At the equivalent point in the Fifty-Sixth Parliament, there were only seven active inquiries. As for the funding, we will take it on notice but it was well over \$1 million that we obtained for the additional funding which allowed us to hire the additional committee staff, which is what we are continuing to do. I cannot see us slowing down, personally, so it is really, of course, all at the will of the House and what it does.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you.

The ACTING CHAIR: Mr President—and maybe, through you, to Mr Webb—recently we were trying to motivate people to sign on to one of our petitions that is sitting on the parliamentary website at the moment and that was open, and we did experience a lot of problems. Can you explain to me, first of all, what happened. I know we had a least three or four outages and I spoke to you about it. You gave me explanations at the time, but the

CORRECTED

outages continued. What exactly is going on? If we are going to have an open system of being able to have people log on and put their signatures to e-petitions, it should be able to handle volumes of more than 400 or 500 or even 1,000. It should be able to, whatever our security systems be, tell the difference between a prevention of service attack and legitimate people seeking to access it. I have got to say that has cost money and time of the people who were trying to access those systems and encouraging and trying to whip up support, which is really what they are designed to do.

The PRESIDENT: What I am going to do is I am going to let Mr Webb go first, but then I just wanted to add something to it to give it a bit more of a historical look as well with the petitions.

Mr WEBB: The systems that you are talking about are our entire website, including access to the petitions system. They were brought down over the course of two weekends to make security upgrades to our infrastructure. They were designated as urgent pieces of security update but they did disrupt access to the systems during that time. The second set of outages on the second weekend also were to introduce what they call load balancing, which is to try to improve the number of simultaneous people that can access the website at one time. It is fair to say that the e-petitions system was designed with a certain amount of usage in mind. We do find that we are having spikes that exceed that usage so we are trying to put in place more measures to help with that. Of course, we always put out notifications before time when we have a scheduled outage, but I have taken from the interaction with Mr Borsak earlier that perhaps we have to look at a more proactive notification of scheduled outages.

The other thing that we are looking at is that part of the digital transformation money that we got last year involves a complete refresh of the infrastructure that we have. A lot of it is currently on premise and has the limitations that come from being on premise, both regarding security—it is less secure than it could have otherwise been—but also around load and the capacity to deal with load. Part of the digital transformation project will move a lot of that infrastructure into what they call infrastructure as a service, or the cloud. You might have heard people talk about the cloud. It will be more secure there but, importantly to Mr Borsak's question, it will also be more reliable there. The capacity to make upgrades in the background and not have the outages that we currently have with on-premise systems will be greatly enhanced by the move into this infrastructure as a service environment. We do very much accept—and Mr Borsak made this point to me over the weekend—that perhaps previously the website was seen more as something that people used occasionally, maybe if they had to go and look up something on *Hansard*. With the introduction of the e-petitions system onto the website, it is now a critical part of our infrastructure and the improvements we are making are to try to make sure it is—

The PRESIDENT: For the honourable members' benefit we are, of course, talking about e-petitions via the LA. We still have not yet completely finalised the platform, which we hope to finalise shortly and have made some changes to what is occurring, in relation to e-petitions for the LC.

The ACTING CHAIR: So when are we going to see that?

The PRESIDENT: The final information I have had is that, since the Procedure Committee reported, Legislative Council e-petitions have been highlighted as a priority PIMS project with work currently scheduled to commence following the completion of the current House papers module. The PIMS project team will include the adaption highlighted in the Procedure Committee report in the development of the e-petitions for the council. It is anticipated that the council e-petitions platform will launch within the first half of 2021. So you should have it by June this year at the latest.

The ACTING CHAIR: Getting back to the e-petitions in the LA, which are the ones that were immediately concerning us and I am sure they concern everybody, if you look at the open petitions that are on there, you are given up to 90 days to get the 20,000. That is only 222 a day if you take a 90-day quarter. I can understand when you spoke to me about it you said it is only set up to cope 200 or 300. But, if people do get active on it, it will not take much then to crash it, so you need to be very, very careful about what your upper limit is going to be. I know you said you were talking 5,000 or 10,000—maybe that will be enough, I don't know. You have got to do some sensitivity analysis around it. But then if you are going to kick off finally the LC e-petition process, which I think we were talking about in the Procedure Committee back in 2019—

The PRESIDENT: It first came into the Procedure Committee in June 2018 and it was decided then at that stage—and I was chairing it—that we were not ready for it, if I could use that expression. We needed to get some funding and we needed to make some changes to the IT. That occurred and it was not until October 2019 that the LA commenced their commencement of it. Then in March 2020, exactly 12 months ago, we agreed we would go along that line and that is what we have been doing.

Mr WEBB: The changes we made to load balancing has improved the situation. I might take on notice just how much it improved it so that I can report on that. I am also reminded by my excellent staff that we are also

CORRECTED

looking at creating an e-petitions app. That app would bypass the need to access through the website, so the app would be able to continue working even when the website has to be brought down for maintenance. That will be for both Houses.

The PRESIDENT: That was one of the changes we agreed we would do before we launched the LC.

The ACTING CHAIR: Can we get some website usage statistics? Those systems would generate that sort of information and, without giving too much away, give us a feel for the load and what areas are of most interest to the public and members, of course.

Mr WEBB: Absolutely. I do not have the figures in front of me but I am happy to take that on notice. The review I did after the outages would indicate that most of the problems in the last couple of weeks were due to the scheduled—we brought the system down to upgrade it, but these load issues are still real so I am happy to provide those statistics.

The ACTING CHAIR: Okay, thanks.

The PRESIDENT: I have just obtained this information. I took on notice the exact dollar figure for the Committee. Can I indicate that the committee staff in 2016-17 were 18, the same number for 2017-18 and the same number for 2018-19. In 2019-20 it went from 18 to 23 staff and then in 2020-21 it went from 23 to 26 staff. That is just for committees only.

The ACTING CHAIR: We did a lot of changes after 2019 to what the upper House was going to be doing. It should not have been a surprise, especially with the change in the bill referral powers to the committees, that this was going to come up.

The PRESIDENT: And the reason we got the money when we got the money was because we put in the application well before we got the money. We anticipated it. Had we waited until it actually happened, we would still be waiting for the funding.

The ACTING CHAIR: I see you have taken Mr Blunt's thunder.

Mr BLUNT: I just wanted to add that we thought we were being highly strategic putting in a budget bid for 2019–20 ahead of the election, anticipating that committee workloads may continue at the same level as they were right at the end of the last Parliament. We gratefully received that additional funding. We put in place the additional staff and, lo and behold, the workload that you have applied in that area has not only been at the same level, but it has taken it to a whole new level. So it has absorbed all of those resources very quickly. We responded by putting in another bid last year and, as Mr President said, we now have 26 in our committee office. We have put in a further bid. It is under consideration at the moment. We are hoping to be able to supplement the staffing even further in the next financial year.

The ACTING CHAIR: You are looking at me furtively, Mr Buttigieg. It is your turn now.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Time flies when you are having fun. I'm looking at the clock.

The ACTING CHAIR: Don't worry, we will give you some extra time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I will take you to the special constables and their arrangements in terms of remuneration and conditions. Can you briefly outline to the Committee what the contractual arrangement is with the police and the Parliament in terms of those people?

Mr WEBB: The special constables are employed by New South Wales Police, who set all of their pay and conditions, so we have no input into, or say over, the pay and conditions of the special constables. We have an MOU that we have entered into with New South Wales Police for the provision of service. They give us a costing, if you like, which we then pay. It costs up to about \$4 million a year for the special constables, so we have that money in. Back when there were some security concerns and we had reviews of the security in Parliament House, the base level of staffing required from the special constables went up by quite a bit. So about half the money we have for special constables is just part of our ongoing appropriation. The other half we have to apply to Treasury on a year-to-year basis to get that money.

The PRESIDENT: Correct. I indicate there has been a decrease in the requirement of the numbers of special constables during COVID, in particular when Parliament was shut down completely to the public. When we reopened the Parliament to the public there has been an increase back to almost the original levels.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I tease this out a little bit? You have these pay and conditions set by the police service and there is a contractual arrangement where we pay \$4 million and we get their services. Does that necessarily bind the Parliament in terms of—it is well known that these people are underpaid compared to what they do. They are some of the lowest paid public servants we have. Does the Parliament have any

CORRECTED

discretion to look at that in terms of it is paying for the service, it is using the service? Presumably there are pay and conditions that are set by the New South Wales Police, but is there anything to stop us paying them more is what I am saying?

The PRESIDENT: Let us go back a little bit in history, if I may. Parliament had private security officers here. We entered into a contract with a private company. They were employed by that private company, they were paid by that private company, and we were billed. We were sent an invoice; we paid it. When the complete security report was prepared, it was clear that they were not sufficient. It was clear that we required a far greater security presence. The special constables was what was required by the Parliament; what was recommended. The special constables are part and parcel of the NSW Police Force. They are part of the NSW Police Force department, police service department. That is who employs them. That is who sets their terms and conditions, as they do other police officers. We have no say in that, nor are we entitled to have a say in that. What we have a say in is we require a certain number to be present in accordance with the security recommendations.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: No, but let me take you to that, President, because this is a pertinent point. Let us have a theoretical situation where—

The PRESIDENT: In theory.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: —the Parliament determined that we would like to pay these people more, and let us call it \$500,000. So the bill ends up being \$4.5 million instead of \$4 million, and that \$500,000 goes on to their—is that illegal? Is that impossible? Can that not be done?

The PRESIDENT: It is not a matter of it being illegal. We do not have the authority to do that.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Why?

The PRESIDENT: Because we do not. At the end of the day, I do not enter into a discussion with the union, the Police Association. I do not enter into discussions with the industrial relations component. Police—police officers, police special constables—that is a matter between them and the police department. That is a matter for them to negotiate. What I can do—what my department does—is that we have a requirement for a specific number. That is the contract we enter into. We are invoiced; we pay that invoice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure. Let me give you an analogous situation. There are minimum awards that apply to the workforce throughout Australia, and they are the minimum rates of pay and conditions payable. Employers are free to pay above those award rates.

The PRESIDENT: But we are not their employer.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: You are paying for the service.

The PRESIDENT: You are spot on, but we are not their employer. I am not their employer. So I cannot be interfering with another employer's situation and his award. We do not buy into that, nor should we.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Can I ask you whether or not you are prepared to make representations to the police Minister on rates of pay and conditions on behalf of these people, given that you pay for their services? What I am saying is, they are misaligned to the award for what they do, and it needs to be looked at. Given that the Parliament employs these people—they put their lives on the line, they do a valuable job, and they do many things that they are not recognised for—I think it is incumbent upon the Parliament to make representations to the Minister for Police and I am asking you: Will you do that today?

The PRESIDENT: I do not believe that I can and I will tell you why. Special constables do not exist for the sole purpose of this Parliament. Special constables is an entity that exists within the NSW Police Force. To be honest, I see them everywhere: if I go to police stations I see them there; if you go to police headquarters you see them there; when I went to the police academy when my daughter graduated as a police officer, they were there. Train stations, they can be there. They are just not created exclusively for us and only us. They are an entire section—they are an entire force—within themselves.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Sure, but the Parliament is capable of making a representation on their behalf, given the value they add to this place, and then that may influence subsequent industrial relations negotiations outside of the Parliament as well for that group of people.

The PRESIDENT: The only way I can answer you is this, Mr Buttigieg: In the four years I have been here I have never had a special constable ever approach me once and say, "Would you make a submission for me to earn more money?" It has not happened. So the short answer is, no. I do not believe that is my job; I really do not. I do not believe it comes within my jurisdiction, if I can use that term. It is a matter between their association, their union, and the police and the Industrial Relations Commission. But I will tell you what I will do. You have

CORRECTED

raised it on three occasions now: I promise you I will have a really good think about it, have a good talk to the DPS, and see where we go from there. But I really cannot see how it comes—

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thank you, President. I am happy to work with you on that.

The PRESIDENT: I am sure you are. Maybe the new President can think about it.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: There was a subpoena.

The PRESIDENT: You didn't have special constables when you were President. You had TNT, from memory.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: No, I brought in the constables.

The PRESIDENT: You brought them in? He should have asked for more money. He brought them in.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I did, but the Coalition Government refused to give it to me.

The PRESIDENT: Good answer. We should swap places, Peter.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I know we have touched on this before, but I just wanted to tease it out a little bit. The exemption from the efficiency dividend, can we get a confirmation that we are exempt this year, and what is the position concerning future years?

The PRESIDENT: The exemption we got was not just for the one year. We worked very hard to get an exemption for the entire four-year period.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So up until two thousand and—

Mr WEBB: Over the forward estimates, that would be 2023-24, is that right?

The PRESIDENT: Yes. So the end of the term, is the simple way of answering it.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In terms of the pre-emptive—we won't use the word "cuts" because I know that you are not a draconian President and you have tried to do the right thing—savings that were made to pre-empt the efficiency dividend, is that being now ploughed back into recurrent?

The PRESIDENT: Yes.

Mr WEBB: Yes. That is right. Anything we agreed on that was prospective got reversed. Anything that had already happened, we took the money and reinvested it into the operation of the Parliament.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Okay.

Mr BLUNT: So, for instance, the contribution from the Department of the Legislative Council—the internal savings figure was there in the office of the Clerk for about two weeks and I had to deploy it into more resources to support committees immediately.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I just want to move on to a couple of security and safety issues. When was the last time we had a traffic safety audit on Hospital Road?

The PRESIDENT: That is a really good question.

Mr WEBB: The part of Hospital Road that we have a particular traffic safety responsibility for is around the traffic box—entering into the Parliament precinct and exiting. We did a review of that as a part of the security upgrades we did at the back of the building a couple of years ago. You might have noticed the shape of the traffic box changed to provide a clearer view back along Hospital Road as you are exiting, because we identified that there was a bit of a blind spot. The traffic box used to come just straight down and it was very hard to see around it, so it now—this is not good for Hansard—slopes down and pokes out at a lower level so that you can see better up Hospital Road. Hospital Road is actually part of the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust, not part of the parliamentary precinct. So other traffic safety issues along Hospital Road would be the responsibility of the Environment portfolio. But for the things we can control, we have looked at it from that point of view.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Just a quick follow up, I will jump back to this evacuation thing in a minute. In terms of that, Mr Webb—I just know from my personal experience, I have raised this before with the President and the trust was mentioned—you come down Hospital Road on the right-hand side, as you are walking up from the Domain crossing that pedestrian crossing there is a whole bike bay parking there and—

The PRESIDENT: And then there is the crossing.

CORRECTED

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: And then there is the crossing. It is bad enough as it is, let alone having a bike bay there where the visibility—sooner or later, someone is going to walk out quickly and get collected.

The PRESIDENT: Can I answer that? You raised that with me the other day and we checked, and I was under the impression it was the Sydney city council that was the responsible authority. I was wrong.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: So did I.

The PRESIDENT: It is the Royal Botanic Garden's responsibility. After the Committee hearing I intend to write to the relevant authority as the President, for them to have a look at that to see if we can get some sort of signage or some slowing down or something, or even moving of the bike rack to a safer position. I have come down there enough times. I tend to come down at five kilometres per hour and still worry that someone is going to run out in front of me. So I agree with you.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr President, without canvassing security issues, you would be well aware of the problems we had in relation to trucks and parking, which was resolved by the former President, which was good. But one of the things we have raised continually is that over the past few years there is pedestrian and vehicle access to this site, and the relationship not only with the Botanic Gardens, but all the other agencies. For example, egressing out of our road and then trying to get across once you get out is—you have got taxi's coming up at, I would say, the speed limit, without making any allegations—almost impossible. It would seem that one of the things that would be valuable would be having a roundtable with all of those authorities and just canvassing all of these issues. I can see Mr Webb is indicating that may have taken place. That would be really good.

The PRESIDENT: I will come to Mr Webb in a minute. I take it that what you are talking about is as you leave and you are turning left where the library is and you have got everyone speeding up the other way and you sort of hope for the best.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: Mr President, it would, without highlighting little bits of it—

The PRESIDENT: There is a problem everywhere.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: There is a problem everywhere. Whenever it rains you have major problems with water covering the road. We have areas where there are pedestrians and we have pedestrian crossings within the general precinct of the site that are not adequately lit. We have vehicles parked where they should not be parked. We have trucks parked opposite the precinct where they should not be parked.

The PRESIDENT: The narrowest of Hospital Road is the biggest problem. I am not going to be the presiding officer to say that we need to take a good chunk of the park adjoining—I am sure Ms Boyd would not want me to say that—and that would help solve a good three lanes each way. I am only kidding. I am definitely not suggesting that, Ms Boyd. But can I indicate the problem was even worse when cars were parked right up to where the gatehouse was and what it took to just remove those car spaces—

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I am well aware of that.

The PRESIDENT: —which I think happened more in your time than in mine. Mark Webb will explain to you what is being discussed at the moment. It really is a serious problem, and I agree with you.

Mr WEBB: You might have noticed recently that Paul Keating and Lucy Turnbull released a report on Macquarie Street east precinct to improve both the Indigenous history storytelling but also connecting all of those institutions from the Opera House right up through to the Australian Museum. A working group has been formed with all of the people affected, including the Parliament, to work on how you provide better connection from the CBD into those areas. We are putting those kinds of safety and traffic and other concerns on the list of things. Indeed, I have a walk around with DPC scheduled this afternoon to show them exactly the kind of issues that you are talking about and say these are the kinds of things that need to be fixed as a part of this whole of area, because it is not enough. As you know better than most, the precinct ends at the fence line. If we cannot get everybody involved in this, we are not going to solve any of these problems.

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: I would urge them to also walk around of a morning when all the trucks are waiting to get into Parliament House, but also of an evening when everyone is trying to get back out.

The PRESIDENT: Mr Primrose, the last project I was involved in where I had to bring all of the entities, authorities, together was to erect the bollards in Macquarie Street. I commenced that project in May 2017, shortly after I became President—I think within a week or two—and it is only now that we are coming close to finishing. It took us three years just to get everyone on the same page.

CORRECTED

The Hon. PETER PRIMROSE: For us to get those trucks out from the back it took a major security incident.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Can I just pick up on the issue with Macquarie Street—

The PRESIDENT: Bollards?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: —and the bollards. I understand that there is a City of Sydney delay, potentially, on that. But can I put on record three concerns. During COVID with the construction there, there were months of being able to socially distance as you walked down that corridor—it has become like a corridor. The accessibility for people in wheelchairs is appalling, but also when you come out of Parliament House at midnight and you need to go that way, it is not very safe. It is a pretty grim thing, and it has been there for a very long time. What is happening? When can we expect that to be done?

The PRESIDENT: A lot is happening now. I think it is a bit unfair to say there were delays on the part of Sydney city council. What happened is, you can appreciate, that the last work that was undertaken there when you look at the various essential services was so long ago that even Dial Before You Dig could not come up with accurate plans of where all of the service lines and pipes were. And of course, as you started to dig you suddenly would discover something. The last issue that caused some delay was the Telstra—

Mr WEBB: Yes. We have had the water pipe, the Sydney Water pipe and then Telstra—

The PRESIDENT: Yes, Telstra was last. So we had the water pipe delay, which is now being dealt with, and then we discovered the Telstra, which had to be moved, and, of course, there was asbestos so all that had to be dealt with, et cetera, but we are well underway now. We should well and truly be finished—

Mr WEBB: The City of Sydney has assured me that we will get the final approvals this week. We have been pre-pouring the concrete for it, in Cowra so we will be able to start work next Monday on the actual installation of the bollards if that permission comes through. This project was due to finish in June last year. If any of you are considering installing bollards anywhere, can I suggest that you dig the pit early because that seems to sharpen the mind. Despite two years of negotiations with everybody, when we dug the pit suddenly all these issues came out of the woodwork. I think you can rest assured that it has been an unacceptable delay from our point of view as well. I am assured that everything will be done this week and we will be able to start the final installation next week. We have done everything we can off site to speed up the process of making sure that installation happens.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: When will be the date that it is done?

Mr WEBB: Certainly it needs to be this financial year, but we are aiming for April at the moment. The money runs out this financial year, so I really want it done by then. At a future point, one of the things we will have to do is re-divert water pipe that goes under Macquarie Street, but that will not get in the way of finishing this.

The ACTING CHAIR: Labor?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thanks.

The ACTING CHAIR: See, I told you I would give you some of our time.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Thank you. I appreciate it. On the modernisation of Parliament technology, I have had representations made to me by a couple of members on the lack of visuals, I suppose, with videoconferencing arrangements when we are doing hearings in the Jubilee and Macquarie rooms; I am not sure about this room. The complaint was that if you are remoting in, particularly as a member, you cannot necessarily see the whole room and they cannot see you. Are we dealing with that at any level?

Mr WEBB: The audiovisual project that I referred to before includes better integration of all that technology together. One of the things that members will be able to access, for instance, is different views of committee rooms and Chambers. A member would be able to have a window open with a broad view of the committee room and then a window open with the videoconferencing that they are doing. So that is part of the audiovisual project. It is probably fair to say that we had not factored in virtual committees when we first made the budget bid. It just was not a thing that was being contemplated. But we have gone back to the project planning and we are now viewing the videoconferencing capability of virtual committees to be a core requirement of the project to try and improve it.

I should also say—and Hansard would be cross with me if I didn't—that one of the other issues that comes up is the audio quality. It depends a lot on a person's or witness's internet connection. If they have a good one, it is pretty solid; if they have a poor one, it might drop out. We are also looking at what we might be able to

CORRECTED

do to improve that so that Hansard does not have to keep writing in "inaudible" due to technical difficulties, which is happening a bit at the moment as well.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is good. On a very practical level, the availability of power points for members to plug in their laptops—

The PRESIDENT: In the Chamber or in committee hearings?

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: In committee hearings.

Mr WEBB: That has been raised with us. When we do the refurbishment of each of the committee rooms, we are looking at issues like power points and pretty much anything you can think of. We will be doing this consultation more formally with members, but we will be asking members to tell us some of those practical considerations. We want to make sure when we finish this piece of work that the committee rooms actually work as well as possible. I am very conscious that New South Wales Parliament, unlike a lot of parliaments, does not have a predesigned, dedicated committee space. If you look at some of the newer parliaments—like Tasmania, for instance, a few years ago introduced a whole new wing with designated committee rooms that have green rooms for witnesses and all those kinds of things, whereas we have tried to retrofit committee activity into an existing building that was not really designed for it. But we are going to try to do everything we can to make it a better set-up than we have had in the past. If there are any of those practical considerations, please let us know. We want to make sure we factor them in as early as possible.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The other one I wanted to take you to was the availability of videoconferencing, or lack thereof, in party rooms—the Labor Party room, obviously the Libs, Nats and crossbench. There is actually no ability to videoconference in those rooms. Given what we have experienced over the last 12 months, to be frank, that is unacceptable. We actually need them in those rooms. I have raised this externally.

The PRESIDENT: You have raised that with me. It is being looked at. It is part of the work that is being undertaken. It is clearly being looked at, because it affects everyone equally. It is not a situation where one side is being affected less or more than another side. So it was a really good point and one we are looking at.

Mr WEBB: You are quite right in saying we did prioritise things like committee rooms and other big spaces. Because people were not using the party rooms quite as much because of the COVID restrictions, we had not prioritised that. But you are quite right and that is something we are looking at now.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: My understanding on that is—this is really a thumbnail sketch, but it is about \$15,000 a fit-out, is it, with those screens?

Mr WEBB: Yes, it depends on whether you get a double screen or a single screen like that. But, yes, for the bigger spaces it is around that amount.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: If we are talking four rooms, \$60,000—is that doable?

Mr WEBB: We can do that. Yes, absolutely.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: The other thing I wanted to raise with you is the on demand video which we touched on in terms of members wanting to have access—

The PRESIDENT: This is the Hansard—

Mr WEBB: No, the video on demand system.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: This is the parallel Federal Parliament stuff. My understanding is that the aim is that we will be able to log in, segment our video and perhaps have it captioned as well on demand. Where are we up to with all of that?

Mr WEBB: The video on demand system—we started recording from the start of 2021. Both committee and Chamber footage is now going into the back end of that system. We have procured it. We are in the process of doing what they call user acceptance testing at the moment. That will go through till mid-March. We will then open it up through the IT reference group to a group of members to test in that mid-March through to April. The intention is for it to be accessible by members from April onwards. So it is well underway.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: April this year?

Mr WEBB: April this year, in the next month or so.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Great.

The PRESIDENT: You are part of that IT reference group, aren't you, Mr Buttigieg?

CORRECTED

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Yes. I do not think we have met for a while, but yes.

Mr WEBB: We are working out the technical side of it now. Once we are satisfied that it is working, we will call the reference group together and ask for volunteers to get involved in from mid-March onwards. On the captioning side of things, we are going out to market now for a live captioning contract and we will feed that into the system over the next few months. The intent is by later this year we will have the live captioning going as well. If any of you have interacted with the Federal Parliament's video on demand system, the video on demand system will basically mimic that. By the end of this project and in a few years' time, we will have a much more sophisticated video on demand system that integrates with Hansard and things along those lines.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Mr Webb, just on a follow-up—does that mean that that staff that would be normally preoccupied with doing that can be diverted back into things like research projects and library duties?

Mr WEBB: Yes, that is right. Yes. At the moment, the particular staff member is going to join the project team developing all of this audiovisual stuff to make sure that it actually works. We are expecting that members still might require assistance in the early days of it until people are used to it, so we will keep that service going. If there are complex requests, we know we will have to take on those complex requests. The new audiovisual team that sits under Mike Price's digital transformation team will take on those functions, and the person who was mainly doing that in the library is going to move over to that team to help out.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Great. I have three minutes left. In terms of the returns to order being delivered electronically, when we were advocating this—I think it is the Department of Premier and Cabinet that is dealing with this at the moment, isn't it? In terms of the advocacy, clearly there is a massive cost involved in actually producing printed copies from something that originated natively electronically. Courtesy of the President's purchase of the scanner, at least members can scan them in with optical character recognition and all the rest of it. But that sort of duplication or triplication, actually, and the cost involved—have we got the impetus to get this stuff done?

The PRESIDENT: If I can say a few things. The short answer is we have to get this done for no other reason than if you look at the returns to order, in 2019 there were 52 orders for papers; in 2020 there were 116 orders for papers. Prior to this, the highest number in any calendar year was 2006—that was only 56. We cannot keep going the way we are going. As part of the Parliament's digital transformation project, the Procedure Office is working with DPS IT Services and the Department of Premier and Cabinet on the eReturns platform. This will provide Parliament and government agencies an electronic system. Documents will be securely transferred to the Parliament through a new parliamentary portal that links to the Parliament's existing document storage databases. It is anticipated that eReturns will improve the accessibility of returns to orders and provide administrative efficiency. The eReturns project is a key priority for the Procedure Office, which is working with DPS IT and departments to complete it as soon as practical.

I tried to get a time line and all I could get is "as soon as practical". But it really is a priority. If I can say this, David Blunt probably will not want me to say this but, the amount of work that is happening in the Clerk's office alone on these—you, Mark, know this better than anyone—the amount that members are also having to go through in trying to access these documents—we have gotten to a stage where we cannot store the returns anymore in the Clerk's office. We are now having to find other areas to store them because of the way they are coming in. So it is an absolute priority. I would have loved to have seen this finished before I go, but I am very confident: It will be finished sooner rather than later.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is good news, President. Thank you.

The PRESIDENT: The Clerk will add one more thing.

Mr BLUNT: I must add very briefly, can I refer members both here in the room and others who might read the transcript to the President's report on the roundtable meeting to consider aspects of the operation of Standing Order 52 that the President tabled in the House on Tuesday 16 February? It has a discussion about electronic returns, both the technological work that we are doing—so there is a technology aspect to it—and there is procedural aspect to it as well, which is dealt with in the report. I will go back a step. We are experiencing a great deal of cooperation and collaboration from our colleagues in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, which is very much appreciated. We are conscious, though, that they need to obtain support for a move to e-returns from the clusters at a public service level, but also at a political level, obviously, from the Ministers. They have identified one procedural issue that needs to be addressed in order to increase the chances of getting that support across the line.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: That is change to the sessional or standing orders?

CORRECTED

Mr BLUNT: Yes, it would likely involve an additional sessional order. Our procedure office team are working something up at the moment and are ready to talk with you and your colleagues.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: Great. Good job.

The PRESIDENT: It is going to happen. It must happen. There is no choice.

The ACTING CHAIR: Is that all?

The PRESIDENT: I think, Chair, this is when you tell me I have 35 days for questions on notice.

The Hon. MARK BUTTIGIEG: I can make him earn his money for another hour.

The ACTING CHAIR: It is 11.30. It is in Government time. So we are asking the Government for a question.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: I have one question, if I may. I will be very brief. If I may ask you by way of question whether you agree with this statement and have any comment on it. Firstly, I just would like to thank, Mr Webb, you and your team and the department for guiding us through COVID. I cannot imagine how much work was done behind the scenes. On behalf of my colleagues I would just like to thank you for your leadership and your guidance throughout that time. I am sure the hours put in by everybody behind the scenes was very much appreciated in a very, very difficult time. Thank you for that. We all are comparing the number of stickers on our passes. That is something that, I think, we will keep for posterity in future times. For getting us through that, thank you.

I also wanted to thank you, Mr Blunt, and your staff for the level of professionalism. You lead from the top. The culture, I think, stands as quite apart from Canberra. I am not in any way diminishing the issues that we do have to deal with going forward. I would love to be a part of any of those committees and other things. But the culture that you lead and the way in which you do it does give a level of professionalism across all of the staff and throughout committees and throughout the LC. I am very, very grateful, as, I am sure, are other members for the way we operate. I thank you for that.

In relation to the code of conduct I just wanted to ask by way of question if it is possible—we had a number of policies referred to and documents referred to, all of which are very valuable and are available. However, I think the most useful, practical thing was the email that came from you immediately, saying "Here are the phone numbers of people you can contact." I would be very happy to elaborate and continue this through the roundtable or the discussion group. But I think, like we have an ethics officer, it is very, very useful to have someone who you can just pick up the phone to very quickly. These things tend to not be reported between 9.00 and 5.00 on a weekday; they tend to be outside of hours. But I have found, as other members have, the ethics officer is very, very useful. If we could consider perhaps the compliance officer or someone else who is a direct point of contact so that the very useful policies, which will probably sit on a shelf somewhere, very carefully thought through—so that the immediate point of contact for members can be a person, a phone line. I recommend on the record that that be potentially a confidential service. I think that would be very, very helpful for members.

But please know, as we sit in the Preston Stanley Room—a female member of Parliament—I very much appreciated your comments about women and what you are doing to help in that culture. I think that we have a very positive outcome going forward from your comments today. So I just wanted to say thank you and ask if you agree with the proposition. Thank you, Mr President. And we are moving a motion, Mr President, that we do not accept your resignation.

The PRESIDENT: I find that extraordinary. Thank you. When people say to me, "Why are you leaving?" and I say, "It's time", that famous expression, they say, "Well, what makes you think it's time?" The fact that everyone is asking me not to go is probably the greatest proof that it is time to go. Thank you very much. I am well aware this is my last budget estimates. I think I have had eight in total, possibly nine in total. I can absolutely tell you without any doubt that this very last one, I believe, has gone so much better than my very first one, which, I think, occurred about a week after I became a Minister. As Mr Shoebriidge rightly put it, I took more questions on notice than I actually answered, and he made sure he let everyone know that. The reality is there is no way I could do this job as President if I did not have the complete support of all honourable members, the complete support of all your staff, all of the support from the Clerk and his entire team, and all the support from DPS, Mark Webb, and your entire team. There is no way anyone could do this job if it was not for that occurring. I thank each and every one of you for that.

To answer one part of your question, Ms Ward: Quite a bit of work has now been undertaken by myself and Mr Speaker, and now the committees in relation to a compliance officer. I have always held the view, since coming here as President, that the ethics adviser, John Evans, is absolutely brilliant, amazing and extraordinary. But he has limited jurisdiction and cannot canvass all of those areas that, I believe, the compliance officer will

CORRECTED

canvass. Again I was hoping that that would be something that would exist prior to my departure, but I am certain and hope to see it exist after my departure. Who knows, maybe I'll be the compliance officer. That's a joke, David. I'm not putting in an application. I thank each and every one of you for all of the courtesy you have shown not only today to myself and to the whole team here, but each and every day. I'll leave it at that.

The ACTING CHAIR: Hear, hear! Thank you, Mr President, for all your service. I doubt you could be a compliance officer because you're too busy being Mr Nice Guy. From this Committee, I'm sure, and certainly from my party, thank you very much for all the help and interaction we've had with you over the years, especially me personally. I look forward, maybe, to catching up once you have left this place in April. And then you can buy me a beer.

The PRESIDENT: The good news is my mobile number remains the same. If I can give any advice to honourable members: Don't take the parliamentary mobile number. Keep your own. You get to take it away with you when you leave.

The ACTING CHAIR: I note you took a number of questions on notice. I am sure they will be answered long before 35 days or 21 days, or whatever it is, is up. On that basis we will close the hearing. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee proceeded to deliberate.